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The Reproduction of an "American Dream" or "American Nightmare": The School Perceptions of Low-Income African American and Latino Young Men of Promise

A Dissertation
in Educational Leadership

by

Roberto Suarez

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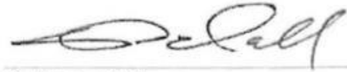
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

June 2023

We approve the dissertation of Roberto Suarez.



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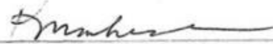

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Certification of Authorship

I certify that I am the sole author of this dissertation. Any assistance received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this dissertation according program guidelines as directed.

Author Signature Roberto Suarez Date 4/28/23

Abstract

Schooling can often function as a structure contributing to the reproduction of an American Dream of material and social success, but it can also reproduce an American nightmare of marginalization. Research studies have noted young men of color populate negative outcomes of academic achievement with trends of low test scores, overrepresentation in special education programs, and underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs, contributing toward higher rates of school failure, delinquency, and dropout with life outcomes involving poverty, despair, and legal punishment.

This study is an exploration of how school rules and expectations impact the perceptions of low-income young men of color. To gain a deeper understanding of the ways research participants' perceptions were influenced by a suburban high school embedded within a middle/upper class white[1] structure, I conducted a critical interpretive investigation. My theoretical lens is an examination of the American Dream ideology anchored within critical theories of marginalization, reproduction, and resistance.

I collected data through interviews of nine low-income male students of color, observations in school hallways and the cafeteria, and a review of four school documents to understand the rules and expectations impacting research participants' school world. Student interviews and observations unveiled reasons for participants' negative perceptions of their school, entailing disconnected academic expectations, punitive disciplinary measures, and white favoritism. Research analysis suggests students resisted respect and insubordination school rules and expectations due to the school's inattention to their low-resourced backgrounds. Research

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[1] While the American Psychological Association recommends capitalizing Black and White as proper nouns, I have chosen to follow the work of other critical scholars; in this study, "white" as a proper noun will remain in lowercase type to decenter whiteness.

participants also shared that their school prevented them from developing their own personal and occupational goals. Interviews further revealed students possessing a defeatist attitude, indicating a need for school supports to help students develop a more positive socioemotional and racial identity, while finding space for student voices to help shape equitable school policies and practices.

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Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to all the young men of color filled with promise I grew up with. I feel like I left you behind and I promise to do my best to always reach out and advocate for better futures for all of us.

Chapter I. Introduction

> Young people who grow up in a household where their parents and older siblings are undereducated, unemployed, or imprisoned, Reagan's words [Anything is possible in America if we have the faith, the will, and the heart.] ring hollow. For them the American Dream, far from being a genuine prospect, is not even a dream. It is a hallucination. (MacLeod, 2009, p. 4)

As MacLeod (2009) explained, youth from low-income backgrounds perceive the American Dream as hallucination. The perception of hallucination may seem inconceivable for those who adhere to and benefit from the American Dream, but for those who reside outside the borders of the dream, an American nightmare may be perceived as reality. For marginalized youth, such as low-income young men of color, the phenomenon of educational underachievement and/or disengagement may simply lie in the interrelatedness of school and society. Youth are faced with the unavoidable necessity of integrating into an American Dream linked to a class-based and race-based economic and social order (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brantlinger, 2004a; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; MacLeod, 2009; Spring, 1989).

Revealed through critical educational research, schools often reproduce inequity through embedded, dominant, and class-based and race-based academic and behavioral expectations organized by school rules and objectives (Annamma et al., 2013; Au, 2009; Brantlinger, 2004b; Gee, 1996; Raby, 2012). How might low-income African American and Latino men perceive their schooling experience with respect to school rules and policies reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies. Through an examination of the American Dream ideology anchored within critical theories of marginalization, reproduction, and resistance, this critical interpretive

study attempted to answer this question and others to better understand student perceptions that impact academic and behavior outcomes.

Problem

I focused on African American and Latino men in this study because of their "precarious situation in American society in general and the education system in particular" (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 310). Research studies have noted young men of color populate the negative outcomes of academic achievement with high rates of low test scores, overrepresentation in special education programs, and under representation in gifted and talented programs (Aud et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2008; Morris, 2001; Noguera, 1997; Whiting, 2009).

Alongside academic achievement outcomes, scholars cite the behavior of young men of color as being "targeted for disciplinary action in the greatest numbers" (Monroe, 2005, p. 46), resulting in drop-out, alienation, delinquency, academic failure, suspensions, and expulsions (Bakken & Kortering, 1999; Bock et al., 1998; Brooks et al., 1999; DeRidder, 1991; Lewis et al., 2010; Skiba, 2002; Skiba et al., 1997). Largely influenced by zero-tolerance policies for infractions linked to alcohol, drugs, insubordination, and tardiness, young men of color (among other youth from low-income backgrounds) have been found to be disproportionally met with school punishment (Kaufman et al., 2000; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). Such policies on discipline have led schools to view particular populations as troublemakers influencing criminalization and fear of our youth (Ayers et al., 2001). In general, young men of color are less likely than white students to receive mild disciplinary alternatives (e.g., verbal warnings, individual meetings, or parent phone call) when referred for an infraction and receive the harshest disciplinary sanctions of suspensions and expulsions (Gregory, 1995; McFadden et al., 1992; Shaw & Braden, 1990). Although inconsistent in findings, Latino men have been found to

be overrepresented in receiving school disciplinary sanctions contributing to the overall disproportional rate of school suspension among minority groups (Gordon et al., 2000). The most significant finding on the disciplinary rates of young men of color was through the analysis of Wallace et al. (2008), which concluded that African American men have the highest rate of suspensions or expulsions at 3.3 (330%) times the rate of their white counterparts.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how academic and behavioral expectations of high school might influence school experiences and perceptions of African American and Latino[2] young men of color. This research specifically focused on African American and Latino men who come from low-income and/or working-class families. This inquiry was qualitative in design; such investigative models lay out evidence that social and cultural identities play a significant role in the academic achievement of such students (Anyon, 1983; MacLeod, 2009; O'Connor, 1999; Ogbu, 1974, 1987; Warikoo & Carter, 2009), along with student perceptions of the opportunity structure and their achievement orientation (Ford & Harris, 1996; MacLeod, 2009; Mickelson, 1990; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980). There has been a lack of critical and interpretative research with these youth, providing little attention to local elements such as school rules and objectives (Smith, 2000). Although studies have depicted macro influences of sociocultural and socioeconomic dimensions on individual school performance, this study focused on the school structure to provide context on local elements of academic and behavioral expectations students perceived as beneficial or deleterious to their perceptions and life chances.

[2]For this study African American male students will be identified as Black students who have not recently immigrated from African regions. Latino male students will be identified as having Mexican heritage background who have not recently immigrated into the United States, and are 2nd generation or greater.

Research that furthers the understanding of the school experiences and perceptions of young men of color is needed to expand current research.

Smith (2000) emphasized research on disengagement, specifically delinquency in education among marginalized youth. Although marginalized youth such as African American and Latino men may believe in the importance of education, their school perceptions may foster negative attitudes toward education (Horowitz, 1983: MacLeod, 2009; Schwartz, 1989). Smith (2000) explained, "Radical critics of education suggest that schools often seek to instill dominant identities in students from diverse social and cultural environments, and that students may resist this attempt" (p. 303). Investigating the school and perceptions of marginalized youth from a critical interpretative approach allows for the development of questions different from current research focused on negative achievement rates (e.g., the highly publicized Black-White achievement gap). Instead of asking how marginalized youth can do better or achieve better in school, the education community can begin asking how the school can improve to meet the social and cultural needs of marginalized youth.

Research Questions

The primary research question is: How do low-income African American and Latino men view and experience their school environment with respect to school rules and policies reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies? Additional questions include:

1. How do these students perceive the official rules, objectives, and expectations of their school?
2. What are the self-perceptions of these students within their school?

3. How do these students perceive and experience school personnel who enforce school rules and expectations (teachers, counselors, deans, and administrators) with respect to accepting their cultural identities?
4. What ideas do these students have on how to improve their schooling experience?

Statement of Significance

The importance of this topic is related to how school expectations influence the perceptions and disengagement of low-income young men of color. Over the years, marginalized youth from underrepresented populations have scored lower on standardized achievement exams compared to their white counterparts; this can inhibit social mobility (Orr, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). Scholars from multiple disciplines have explained that marginalized youth experience higher rates of school failure, delinquency, and dropout, while facing future life circumstances involving poverty, despair, and legal punishment (Lawrence, 2007; Mehan, 1992). Although numerous studies have examined school achievement of young men of color, findings have been mixed in addressing or understanding underachievement and disengagement. Quantitative researchers have found academic achievement trends correlated to race, IQ, socioeconomics, and teacher quality (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Coleman et al., 1966; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969; Reardon, 2011) but may fall short in answering why and how questions. However, qualitative studies have laid out evidence involving the phenomena of social and cultural identities along with perceptions of the opportunity structure and achievement orientation (Ford & Harris, 1996; MacLeod, 2009; O'Connor, 1999; Ogbu, 1974, 1987; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). As opposed to other research studies, this qualitative study sought to better understand the influence of local school elements of rules and expectations on the perceptions of low-income young men of color to further

explanations and expand initiatives and opportunities for these young men. This research serves to add to existing literature focused on the school structure and contribute ways schools can recognize and transform inequitable school policies and practices.

Placing Research Into Personal and Professional Context

The school experience of low-income African American and Latino men is both a professional and personal focus of mine. As a Latino male of Mexican heritage raised in a primarily African American working-class neighborhood, I have been highly influenced by current educational and early life experiences. To cite one professional example of hundreds, I would like to refer to a talented young African American man I met a few years ago—Anfernee Williams[3]. Although Anfernee was an outspoken and talented young man with unique creative and introspective abilities, none were aligned with the school's academic and behavior expectations. He was a low C average student with test scores under the 50th percentile who had multiple incidences with authoritative teachers and deans citing him with insubordination due to a quick temper, possibly due to his father having been murdered when he was a child. Because of little support from home and negative perceptions of school personnel due to negative achievement and disciplinary records, Anfernee became disheartened and disengaged. In the end, Anfernee's perception of school and his future became highly influenced by his background and the schools' underachieving and insubordinate labels. What type of student would Anfernee be if he were not negated by expectations founded within dominant school norms—possibly a more valued member of the school community with a greater freedom of choice in forming a positive self-image and future outlook. Although it can be argued teachers have influential input regarding Anfernee's future direction, I would argue that today's school achievement system

[3] To protect the privacy of all individuals referred to in this study, pseudonyms will be used.

highly influences teachers' perceptions of children; teachers see students as end products who have met, exceeded, or failed achievement expectations. Through my school experience over the years, teachers have been highly pressured by the school to improve student achievement. Yet, they were provided little support to help students socioemotionally and are continuously evaluated and blamed for students not achieving, inadvertently shaping negative perceptions of students.

As an individual born to working-class immigrant parents from Mexico, I developed a unique educational outlook different from many of my educational colleagues. Many of my home and neighborhood-based cultural beliefs, practices, knowledge, and language (including Spanglish and Ebonics) conflicted with school expectations, leading to a nonparticipant approach in my early years of schooling. Beginning in kindergarten, I remember several occasions when my teachers negatively judged me due to my weak academic and English language skills. Although I developed a high level of distrust in my parents' language and overall capabilities because they could not help me meet school expectations, I love them more than words can express for teaching me values not directly taught in school and helping me become a compassionate and hardworking father, husband, and educator focused on empowering others.

Relating to some of my low-income young male students of color, during my younger years, there were times I felt extremely frustrated with my disconnection from school. During those times, I remember connecting with neighborhood peers who shared the same sentiment. Like me, these peer groups did not make the final cut for basketball, baseball, or football. They did not fit a "Brady Bunch" or "Leave it to Beaver" clean-cut image. Ironically, our neighborhood park was named "Troublemakers" and became a local youth site involving misbehavior, bullying of smaller kids, and destroying public property; teenagers tagged

playgrounds with graffiti; set slides on fire; and vandalized roundabouts, swing sets, and playsets. My peers were involved with fighting, drinking, drugs, theft, and gang life. One of the last times I was with what I now understand as my culturally, socially, and economically frustrated peer groups was at a trailer home party where several individuals walked through the front door celebrating a shooting that took place while being welcomed by a cloud of weed smoke, empty 40s (i.e., 40-ounce beer bottles), drunken teens, and playing toddlers. Yes, children were playing during what I view as a disturbing experience, even for a young man from a rough background.

I have a few fond memories of my education, specifically when I was able to connect with my personal strengths in art, philosophy, physics, and psychology; nevertheless, the memories that stay with me left scars and feelings of alienation, disappointment, and failure. I was able to engage in school as a student, often to the point of exhaustion due to meeting academic, behavioral, and family challenges, but this came at the expense of dismissing my parents' social and cultural identity, leading to feelings of anxious turmoil about conforming to someone else's standards or possibly developing a dual frame of reference (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995) to satisfy complex social world expectations. Although I was able to successfully engage with school expectations, unfortunately, numerous family members and neighborhood friends did not succeed in meeting school expectations and were negatively impacted by economic, psychological, and sociological struggles. Some died due to thoughtless acts of violence. My friend Jose, who had a quick tongue and was quick to be disciplined in school, was murdered in cold blood in front of his pregnant girlfriend, while my lyrically talented but bored-in-school friend, Tyrone, joined a gang, dropped out of school, and continued to smoke weed excessively and deal drugs. Considering all this, it was several family

members, neighborhood friends, and my students who motivated me in a quest for understanding how schools influence the experiences and perceptions of low-income young men of color.

Dissertation Overview

To understand how the perceptions of low-income young men of color are influenced by school rules and expectations, I selected a public high school in a suburban community outside a large metropolitan city. I critically examined the school's rules and expectations and the perceptions of nine low-income young men of color. Through document review, observations, and interviews, I attempted to answer the research question: How do low-income African American and Latino men view and experience their school environment with respect to school rules and policies reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies?

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I discuss past and relevant literature that informed my theoretical framework of examining of the American Dream ideology anchored within critical theories of marginalization, reproduction and resistance. The third chapter discusses the methods employed within my methodological approach. I discuss the school site and the four schools' documents used during my investigation, along with the time frame of my observations within the school's hallways and cafeteria. I further discuss the recruitment and selection process of the nine aforementioned students.

In the fourth chapter, I describe the school, providing context to school experiences and perceptions shared within student interviews. This chapter emphasizes the values, norms, and ideologies of the school. Chapter 5 presents students' school experiences and perceptions as illustrated by interview data. Chapter 6 lays out themes that arose through the data. This chapter examines the conflict and resistance between students and their school experiences and perceptions. Chapter 7 includes a summary and implications for future research.

Chapter II. Literature Review

As a result of ambiguous and mixed findings of underachievement and disengagement rates of marginalized African American and Latino male students in the United States, research furthering this topic requires a discussion of relevant literature. In the following chapter, I examine the ideologies embedded in today's schools that negatively influence the perceptions of young men of color. The focus of this investigation aimed at unpacking and understanding six points of research: (a) The American Dream ideology, (b) marginalization, (c) deficit thinking, (d) young men of promise, (e) social reproduction and resistance theories, and (f) reproduction of school marginalization. Furthermore, this investigation sought to better understand how low-income African American and Latino male students perceive their schooling experience structured under dominant ideologies. The goal of this research was to expand initiatives and opportunities to provide these young men the freedom of choosing their own destiny rather than meeting outcast systems leading toward an American nightmare of failure, dropout, and expulsion with futures of unemployment, imprisonment, or death.

Marginalized youth (e.g., young men of color) experience high rates of school failure, delinquency, and dropout while facing life circumstances involving poverty, despair, and legal punishment (Lawrence, 2007; Mehan, 1992). The research surrounding such youth is lengthy and has been highly investigated since the 1960s with published findings on correlations between educational resources and academic achievement differences related to race (Coleman et al., 1966). Since then, much of the literature provides multiple theories regarding the phenomenon of marginalized students who fail or are failed by the school system. Over the years, quantitative researchers have investigated theories surrounding academic achievement trends as they correlate to race, IQ, socioeconomics, and teacher quality (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997;

Coleman et al., 1966; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969; Reardon, 2011). Qualitative studies have laid out evidence involving phenomena of social and cultural identities along with perceptions of the opportunity structure and achievement orientation (Ford & Harris, 1996; MacLeod, 2009; O'Connor, 1999; Ogbu, 1974, 1987; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

Artificially constructed labels placed on marginalized youth cause society to view others as biologically or environmentally situated at the lower end of the bell curve. (Coleman et al., 1966; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). The bell curve model has been argued as penetrating the school system through discursive tools and mental models; categorizing, separating, and ranking children's performance value; and creating a binary structure with the marginalized on the (negative) left side of the curve and the privileged on the (positive) right side of the curve (Au, 2009; Brantlinger, 2004b; Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008; McLaren, 1997; McNeil, 2000). Those at the negative end of the bell curve have come to be known as the at-risk, bad, or special education student no teacher wants in their classroom or school and no parent wants in their neighborhood. These children are referred to as lazy, insubordinate, inattentive, hyperactive, or disorganized individuals with apathetic or defiant attitudes (Santa Rita, 1993; Vermeire, 2002; Zuckerman, 2010). The school system marks them as low-level learners or test takers who possess an intellectual inability to abstractly, deductively, or logically process information; these children are also considered behaviorally noncompliant. Similar to an article entitled "Teacher Calls Autistic Student 'Hot Mess,' Parents 'Crazy' on Facebook" (Kunzia, 2013), teachers and school leaders cringe or sarcastically respond when dealing with the "hot mess" student who cannot self-regulate; this child is described behind closed doors as "the child who isn't the sharpest tool in the shed" or "the brightest crayon in the box." These labels are harsh; however, from my

experience, most low-income disadvantaged students experience these indirectly by hearing privileged, middle-class, or affluent students being referred to as good, polite, well-mannered, exceptional, gifted, hardworking, independent, active, logical, or future doctors while never hearing these descriptions of themselves. These descriptions also saturate adult real estate conversations and media publications such as U.S. News or Newsweek by comparing and labeling school districts as bad, good, better, and the best (Kantrowitz, 2005; Morse, 2010; Vevea, 2015). Oftentimes, the methodology used within these publications consists of high-stakes standardized achievement rates and socioeconomic and racial demographics (Childress, 2014; Kotok et al., 2015; Sacks, 2002).

Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners differ in how they define or label marginalized students. On one side, research approaches marginalization through a framework of individual inadequacy in meeting standards and expectations of an equal opportunity structure (Feagin, 1972; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Ryan, 1971); on the other end, opposing research argues a structural influence on a process of marginalization (Gonzalez, 2001; James & Taylor, 2008; Kearns, 2011; Te Riele, 2006; Thomson, 2002). Beginning with the first of six sections, the American Dream ideology will assist to unpack how high school academic and behavior expectations influence the perceptions of low- income young men of color.

The American Dream Ideology

To understand the broader cultural and social context in which internal mechanisms of the school are embedded, it is essential to investigate what schools teach students. The following section provides an overview of the "American Dream" ideology that includes education stratification and ranking. The American Dream ideology, along with education stratification and

ranking, provides a conceptual lens regarding what is valued and taught in schools, thereby influencing the perceptions of students, and what is the accepted ideology in American society.

Embedded in the culture of the U.S. education system is what scholars refer to as the "American Dream." The American Dream represents a dominant achievement ideology suggesting the United States is a land of equal opportunity: Any individual can become a material and social success through hard work and effort (Hargreaves, 1967; Hochschild, 1995; MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 1997). Achieving social mobility through the American Dream ideology involves conditioning individualistic beliefs of working hard and being granted access to move up an economic and societal ladder. This ideology is contrary to collectivist thought focused on instilling beliefs in the importance of working together within the larger society through social responsibility (Spring, 2014; Triandis, 1995). Within an individualistic American society, the rhetoric of equal opportunity is supposedly extended to all groups through systems of education and law; however, contradictory evidence suggests all groups are not equal in society, contributing to oppressed inequalities (Freire, 1970; Brantlinger, 2004a; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Mehan, 1992; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1994; Valencia, 1997).

The values of individualistic hard work and effort as opposed to the collectivist equal value of individuals best supports a meritocratic, competitive society as opposed to a democratic collective society (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Spring, 2014; Triandis, 1995; Young, 1958). For marginalized groups, the individualistic American Dream is difficult to fulfill since this ideology promotes the need to move up and out from their marginalized communities. Hochschild (1995) noted:

> The ideology of the American dream as a whole, is flawed. One problem stems from the radical individualism often associated with the dream (although the ideology entails nothing that prohibits groups from pursuing collective success). Achievers mark their success by moving away from the tenement, ghetto, or holler of their impoverished and impotent youth, thus speeding the breakup of their ethnic community. This is a bittersweet phenomenon. The freedom to move up and out is desirable, or at least desired. But certainly those left behind, probably those who leave, and arguably the nation as a whole lose when groups of people with close cultural and personal ties break those ties in pursuit of or after attaining "the bitch-goddess, success." (p. 35)

The contradiction of the American Dream becomes more of a pursuit or competition toward success. Through an accepted social conditioning process of social and cultural norms, individuals see themselves as competitors or opponents vying for economic and social power. This competitive and social conditioning phenomenon becomes apparent in early social structures, constructing societal roles and positions (Gould, 1996). In modern times, the most influential competitive and social positioning system is illustrated within the schooling process (Apple, 1995; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). Society and schools become integrated into one system, reflecting one another, where the roles of citizens begin during the schooling process. Spring (2014) argued schools reflected the dominant society, upholding beliefs, norms, and values of the American Dream. The good, achieving, or gifted child is promoted, a go-getter employee, or manager; and the bad, underachieving, or at-risk child is the unemployed or incarcerated citizen. As an integrated system, schooling becomes the structure in which children are sorted into social, political, and economic roles of (a) privileged groups achieving the American Dream or (b) marginalized

groups exiled into an "American Nightmare" (Fowler, 2007; Freire, 1970; Spring, 1991; X, 1964).

In American society, who are the dominant privileged groups and who are the subordinate marginalized groups? Mickelson (1990) stated minorities, women, and members of the working class fall into the subordinate groups who often fail to receive the same societal benefits (e.g., wages, jobs, promotions) of the dominant group of middle-class white men, even when both groups possess similar achievement credentials. The fact that minority groups receive fewer societal benefits has led researchers to investigate mechanisms correlated to inequitable social and economic phenomena. Measurement mechanisms such as grades, test scores, disciplinary records, and rankings align with individual achievement; however, scholars question the biased and perpetuating nature of such apparati (Gould, 1996).

The current emphasized institutional mechanisms for accessing the American Dream are standardized high-stakes exams which purportedly measure achievement and intellectual capital while promoting stratification (Grodsky et al., 2008; Valencia & Guadarrama, 1996). Standardized high-stakes exams theoretically represent a measurement in the achievement of a student who has worked hard in school. With this theoretical perspective, the ranking of students that is correlated with standardized achievement exams allows for individuals to be rewarded through individual awards, college admission, scholarship benefits, and greater opportunities in social and economic mobility.

However, evidence from scholars has shown achievement exams are correlated more with family income, creating what Edsall (2012) titled in a New York Times article "A Reproduction of Privilege" where students from families with earnings in the top income quartile score highest on high-stakes ACT and SAT exams. These students also attend the most

competitive and influential colleges (Reardon, 2011). Because the stratification of students is correlated with socioeconomic factors, the marginalization of youth from low-income families tends to be perpetuated because they score lower on high-stakes exams, lowering their social mobility opportunities. The use of high-stakes testing to measure achievement can simply be privileging the privileged and further marginalizing the marginalized (Brantlinger, 2003; Te Riele, 2006). In the next section, I examine the views and influences of high-stakes testing.

Education Stratification and Ranking

Scholars have argued for and against a stratifying education system that separates, categorizes, and labels children indoctrinated within the American Dream ideology (Brantlinger, 2003; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Yet, education models promoting stratification in education argue in favor of an achievement ideology that promotes a meritocratic education (Deutsch, 1975; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Hook & Cook, 1979; Son Hing et al., 2011). Today's education model has been argued as a meritocratic system of achievement and not a democratic system where students are intrinsically valued. In particular, scholars arguing against stratification have suggested child-centered approaches in schools that advocate democratic values in the educative process of children (Dewey, 1916; Fischman & McLaren, 2000; Giroux, 2012). Ambiguity and disagreement within today's schooling objectives has affected the nature of achievement exams. Achievement exams have been viewed by scholars as either tools for learning or tools for supporting a meritocratic achievement model. The latter has created disruption in the U.S.'s democratic and equal opportunity education model.

Grodsky et al. (2008) provided contradictory evidence of the use of standardized high-stakes achievement exams. On the one hand, achievement exams are promoted as an apparatus promoting equal opportunity for all. On the other hand, the exams unveil inequalities within

racial populations and differences in achievement rates when looking into class and gender. These exams have reflected, reproduced, and transformed broader forms of social inequality. Where scholars such as Kilgore and Pendleton (1993) viewed these exams as offering opportunities to learn and reducing inequalities, scholars Sorenson and Hallinan (1977) argued a contrary effect of these exams has been rising inequalities. The stratification occurring in education has been argued as correlating to standardized achievement exams.

However, the exams or the test score data itself are not necessarily viewed as the problem causing inequality. Through an equal opportunity research lens, achievement exam data can display two interpretations: (a) test scores can display unequal educational resources available to students or (b) test scores exhibit unequal individual achievement abilities. Although both interpretations are considered scientific evidence supporting inequalities between students, Gould (1996) argued all empirical data can entail biases; even objective scientific methods can uphold specific knowledge tainted by dominant ideologies. Standardized high-stakes exams themselves may or may not contribute to larger inequality issues. However, they have been called gate-keeping mechanisms possessing embedded ideologies and contributing to a social stratification process of categorizing, labeling, and/or tracking of students into positions within the societal hierarchy (Black, 2003; Gould, 1996; Grodsky et al., 2008; Kahlenberg, 2012).

Scholars framing research within meritocratic ideals based on effort and ability principles advocate a stratifying model of education oriented in achievement ideology. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) promoted the separating of the masses into a categorized hierarchy correlated with IQ as a social order sustaining an economically wealthy America. Their approach supported a distribution of wealth rationalized by and positioned from a top-down hierarchy structure. Herrnstein and Murray argued everyone, even those at the bottom of the IQ or social hierarchy,

can share in the American Dream because the top of the social order will create jobs and wealth for all. On the contrary, scholars promoting democracy in education view this "American Dream" as an "American Nightmare" with a stratifying and victimizing social order fulfilling the needs of self-profiting oppressors (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2012; McLaren, 1997; Ogbu, 1994; X, 1964).

Achievement-oriented scholars such as Kao and Thompson (2003) specifically acknowledged their research as seeing disadvantaged and ethnic groups as "liabilities to overcome" (p. 436). Their research highlighted studies explaining that poor and ethnic minorities are stratified into school tracks based on ability or achievement but not necessarily based on IQ. However, both Kao and Thompson also acknowledged less advantaged and/or ethnic groups offer contributions to research on how individuals succeed despite obstacles. Cited in Kao and Thompson (2003), Cooper (1990) argued a single model of achievement as insufficient within today's diverse demographic educational makeup. Cooper's work (1990) insisted research into the differences in socialization practices influenced achievement for less advantaged and ethnic groups. Specifically, Cooper explained the "ways in which class, family, and school factors affect educational attainment are not the same for different ethnic groups" (p. 160), and disadvantaged and ethnic groups require increased parental support and study time to increase achievement.

Parallel to the American Dream ideology and social stratification is the idea of ranking. Gould (1996) contended ranking was an ancient idea in creating societal hierarchies. Cited in Gould (1996), in Plato's *The Republic,* Socrates creates a noble lie advising Glaucon on developing a stratified hierarchy for society. Socrates advised society be constructed through assignment by merit to three classes: rulers, auxiliaries, and craftsmen. Socrates explained that a

stable society demands for its citizens to honor and accept their rank along with the status they have been conferred. Scholars, based on American Dream ideology, support this educational ranking structure. This idea has survived into modern times as “functionalism,” a mindset that sees stratification as part of an interconnected system requiring everyone to occupy their place in society with growing industrial societal demands and advancements in technology (Clark, 1962; Collins, 1971; Parsons, 1937).

Achievement standards set by the political and economic structure have been used in measuring and ranking individuals. Children’s perceived academic and cognitive abilities, measured by standardized test scores, have been used for placement into the societal structure. Scholars have disagreed on how to best measure unobservable characteristics of individuals; there is little consensus within agreed upon metrics regarding characteristics of cognitive ability, unlike observable physical traits such as height and weight (Grodsky et al., 2008). Because height and weight are observable and quantifiable with standards of measurement commonly agreed upon, scholars (e.g., Grodsky et al., 2008) have pointed out that unobservable characteristics of cognitive ability are easily opened to bias and interpretation.

Researchers have pointed to evidence of bias in all empirical research, including quantitative or scientific methods. Gould (1996) cited research influenced by the “allure of numbers” (p. 106) in craniometry in the 19th century and IQ in the 20th century as examples of bias in the creative interpretation of science; this research provided culturally accepted irrefutable and precise facts. Gould cited Agassiz (1850) as an early researcher who promoted education as a system supporting Blacks to be trained in “hand work” and Whites to be trained in “mind work” (Gould, 1996, p. 79). He further argued early research in intelligence and any empirical research possessing seemingly objective quantifiable evidence obtained subjective

interpretation. Such subjective interpretation methods can perpetuate or negate dominant ideologies, stratifying groups into social order placements. Students are measured, compared, or compete among one another to set norm curve equivalent (NCE) ranges within a group of data points, supporting the bell curve ideology (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

Standardized data points within NCE methods position children within a distribution of scores to be used in comparison to other children. High-stakes college entrance exams and other achievement test scores are reported by the government's educational bureaucracy or testing agencies, such as the College Board or ACT, in percentiles to children's respective schools and families to inform student placements among other children (Swafford, 2007). The 50th percentile benchmark labels the norm/midrange for all students in local and national populations. Students falling under the 50th percentile are ranked and labeled low achievers not meeting achievement norms (Brantlinger, 2004b; Fendler & Muzzaffar, 2008). Each percentile segment below or above the norm divides children into a lower or higher percentile achievement bracket. Since most marginalized children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, specifically young men of color, test below the 50th percentile, students are placed in classrooms with poor pedagogical practices that negatively affect school relationships. McLaren explained:

> Critics in education have argued for over a decade that schools reproduce distributive norms linked to the larger social order and division of labor; that is, they perpetuate or reproduce the social relationships, pedagogical practices, cultural formations, and attitudes—in short, the habitus needed to sustain the existing patterns of inequality in the larger society. (McLaren, 1997, p. 174)

Because African American and Latino male high school students with low-income working-class backgrounds often test in the lower percentile ranges on high-stakes standardized assessments,

they are forced into a vulnerable lower hierarchical status, positioned as society's craftsmen or blue collar manual labor workers at the lower end of the social and economic hierarchy. This label and position, as Socrates explained it, is to be accepted by marginalized populations.

The political rhetoric of the "American Dream" focused on working hard and obtaining material and social success has led to skeptical questioning of why such a focus on working hard exists and for whose benefit. Because all students, specifically those within marginalized populations, do not enter the educative process at equal levels, educators need to question how young men of color can be provided such rhetoric in achieving the American Dream. The question of how students are valued and what democratic choices they have is present in today's purpose of education. Educators need to question if students are intrinsically valued, or if the current education system values the future globalized economic value of students, Scholars have posited theories founded in capitalism, expansion of colonialism, globalization, and neoliberalism as modern purposes of education (Apple, 1995; Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2012; Harris, 2004; Mufwene, 2020; Willis, 1977).

Researchers viewing today's educational purpose as economically centered as opposed to child-centered have described schools as institutions fulfilling the needs of the social and economic social order, creating social and power relations reflected in the greater society. In fulfilling economic needs of the nation, the American Dream theoretically allows individuals to gain a greater freedom of individual choice through an apparatus of monetary wealth. Considering all individuals within the United States may not have equal opportunity based on preexisting inequality through social, economic, and/or historical implications has enabled researchers to investigate achievement patterns from a larger lens. Several theories addressing the patterns and trends of student achievement focus on approaches with varying angles. This

study considered a structuralist approach in understanding the role schools have on affecting achievement rates of young men of color.

Radical educators have argued that education is not the mythic “great equalizer” in achieving the “American Dream.” Rather, education is a system providing a “distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labor” (Giroux, 1983, pp. 257–258). Within this framework, schools as institutions can only be understood through an analysis of their relationship between the state and the economy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Saltman, 2014). In this view, the deep structure or underlying significance of schooling can only be revealed through analyzing how schools function as agencies of social reproduction and how they legitimize capitalist rationality while sustaining dominant social practices. Before moving forward with deficit thinking, young men of promise, resistance theories, and social reproduction, it is best to understand marginalization and redefine the at-risk language of students who do not meet school expectations.

Marginalization: Redefining At Risk

A wide array of education research is laden with the term “at risk” for students not meeting academic and social standards. The at-risk label culturally and socially situates students within a deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) model associated with not meeting academic and/or behavior expectations. Students meet deficit labels in school by failing classes or underperforming on high-stakes standardized achievement exams, dropping out of school, or being expelled through disciplinary sanctions.

According to Applebee (1991), the focus on the education of at-risk students received more attention in the 1980s. The term at risk can be seen as an evolved label from 1983’s *A Nation at Risk* with published findings leading to current school reform policies and debates as

they relate to failing students and schools (Sacks, 2002; Swadener, 2010). Students have been marked at risk because they are seen as being at risk of failure and not able to meet academic or behavior standards. Cited in the introduction section, Brantlinger (2004a) questioned, “for whom” and “to whom” are these students at risk. Sacks (2002) believed the answer correlated with today’s corporate model of education; schools run similar to businesses, and children are viewed as “products” (p. 30) who are trained to serve the labor needs of the American industry.

Although the at-risk label has been connected to labor needs, the label affects the identity and perceptions of a child in school. The label of at risk has been argued as producing feelings of inadequacy, whereby school children question their belonging and placement at the school (Te Riele, 2006). Archer and Yamashita (2003) revealed immigrant children identified as at risk feel particularly unwelcomed by the school because of a focus on standardized testing and needing English fluency and an American or Western European background. The at-risk label has been observed as producing negative views of personal self-worth as a consequence of not feeling self-assured in meeting school expectations (Te Riele, 2006). This at-risk phenomenon potentially affects student behavior and achievement, whereby deficit labels within the school structure limit the acceptance of students’ social or cultural identity while disempowering students’ roles as active agents within their future social mobility. Consequently, the at-risk label has become a controversial term when considering the purpose and negative influence it carries when working with school children who are culturally or socially outside the normative development framework.

Cited in Te Riele (2006), “The language of at-risk, as opposed to marginalization, holds individual youth accountable for his or her ‘at-riskness’ instead of the complex, social, political,

gendered, racial, and economic factors that contribute to one's particular situation (Gonzalez, 2001; James & Taylor, 2008; Thomson, 2002)" (p. 131). As argued by Te Riele (2006), marginalization or social disadvantaging is not a linear or static process but rather a complex development. In her examination of both empirical observations and discursive conceptualizations of marginalization, Te Riele proposed a focus on the interactions between the individual and school and a shift from what she argued as the simplistic policy identification of marginalized youth by emphasizing solely on their personal characteristics. Te Riele (2006) explained:

> An individual student may be marginalized by some aspects of schooling but not others, may like some teachers, peers, subjects, but not others, and may behave differently in response to marginalization from other students. For each student a different combination of school factors, interacting with out-of-school factors, is responsible for their marginalization. (p. 135)

The school setting is an environment with multiple factors that influence the self-worth and well-being of youth. Not all marginalized students will experience marginalization in the same ways. The complexity of the human factor and educational mechanisms that play a role in child development can produce mixed feelings in students. Although students may enjoy some aspects of school, other factors (e.g., low grades, low standardized achievement scores) can produce feelings of alienation (i.e., a feeling in which they do not belong). These feelings ultimately affect socially constructed behavior, influencing achievement and future social mobility. Shor (1996) described this behavioral phenomenon as a response to unequal power in the school setting, whereby students become exiled through institutional mechanisms.

Kearns (2011) advocated for an anti-oppressive education model and viewed policies as directly affecting the lives, identities, and possibilities of so-called at-risk youth. She further called for anti-oppressive educators to dispose of oppressive labels and practices in school that are oftentimes connected to individual cultural and economic backgrounds. Kearns built on the work of critical policy theorists to research ways to rework policies shaping social identities (Lesko, 2001; Lipman, 2004; Te Riele, 2006; Thomson, 2002). For these reasons, there has been a growing trend of theorists favoring the term *marginalized* in lieu of *at risk*; scholars can focus on the economic, political, and social structure influencing behavior rather than the cultural and social identity of individuals isolated in a phenomenological vacuum. Students outside the school's dominant cultural and social makeup are often seen with deficits because their backgrounds do not align to the dominant culture, and they do not meet the tenants of the American Dream ideology. The next section unpacks how the school pedagogically views students from outside dominant cultural and social identities.

Deficit Thinking

Socially and economically marginalized youth and their families have been perceived as apathetic, uneducated, and ill-equipped to meet white middle-class values often situated in traditional theories of normative developmental expectations (Brantlinger, 2003; Burton et al., 1996; Lipman, 1998; Oakes, 1995; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990). These negative perceptions can exist within prevalent school practices or within the unaware consciousness of individuals living with white privilege (Brandon, 2003). Such mindsets and practices are said to be assimilation practices in which the attitudes and norms of groups outside the dominant culture are contradictory and perceived as deficient (Brandon, 2003; Spring, 2014; Valencia, 1997). School achievement tends to be out of reach for discriminated populations based on deficient attitudes

about children who are outside the dominant culture. Such deficient notions identify marginalized youth as a problematic minority versus a “normal” majority where dominant conceptualizations of at-risk youth require blaming the victim rather than investigating the structure (Te Riele, 2006; Valencia, 1997). Cited in Simone (2012), “Oakes (1995) referred to deficit thinking as assumptions that low-income children, children of color, and their families are limited by cultural, situational, and individual deficits that schools cannot alter” (p. 10). Deficit thinking influences marginalized students; they are treated as the problematic or ghetto child who needs to be built up in skills and attitudes (Ryan, 1971; Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking may be influenced by individual perceptions and social interactions; however, it can be argued that macro level systems and institutions perpetuate deficit contexts of youth living in low-income or poverty contexts (Books, 2004).

Deficit thinking within school settings shapes the mindset of educators working with marginalized populations. Valencia (1997) explained deficit thinking is an endogenous theory rooted in racist discourse promoting education as an organized, oppressive design of authority and power, designed for marginalized students to keep their place in society. Marginalized individuals, depending on the intellectual and scholarly lens of a given period, are viewed as possessing internal deficits or deficiencies as opposed to strengths considered with an at-promise model (Swadener & Lubbock, 1995; Valencia, 1997). This deficit belief system perceives the success of a student as predisposed or fixed and out of the control of the individual, teacher, and school. It also places students in vulnerable circumstances, promoting a victimized environment and dismantling the opportunity for developing agency in students. Influenced by purposeful mechanisms, marginalization can develop hopelessness and pessimistic mindsets in populations situated within disadvantaged societal positions rather than encouraging a challenge of power

relations and the establishment of new forms of critical thinking and learning (MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 1997; Valencia, 1997). Students underachieving or disengaging from the U.S. educative process may be due to not fitting social, cultural, and economic norms, contributing to a status of marginalization in a deficit-thinking model of education.

Within the framework of challenging power by establishing new forms of critical thinking and learning, scholars have opposed deficit-thinking labels and shifted to at-promise language (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). At-risk labels and achievement gaps perpetuate deficit thinking by pathologizing assumptions of individuals based on race, first language, class, family structure, geographic location, and gender (Love, 2004; Polakow, 1993; Shields et al., 2005; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Swadener (2010) further explained the use of deficit-thinking labels as holding oppressing naming functions which socially exclude marginalized populations. Oppressive labels have also been contended as sustaining and perpetuating a current inequitable wealth distribution system in the United States (Funiciello, 1993; Polakow, 1993). Stratifying marginalized children in school with deficit-thinking or oppressive labels allows for the continuation of inequality as opposed to a more equitable distribution of materials, resources, education, and power. If the system became more equitable in the distribution of resources and at-promise children received equal or more resources than children who were privileged, the privileged child may become the at-risk student, placing their privileged status in jeopardy (Funiciello, 1993; Polakow, 1993).

Further challenging oppressive labels is the language of an “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). The notion of the education debt shifts away from achievement gap language attending to student deficits and toward social inequalities students face in the context of health, early childhood experiences, out-of-school experiences, and economic security

(Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rothstein & Wilder, 2005). The education debt framework allows for a focus on teaching and learning. Ladson-Billings specifically argued the education system has become bankrupt, requiring reorganization and redesign for marginalized populations to be offered nonoppressive and equitable educational opportunities. Using language of "at promise" and "education debt" challenges deficit models, allowing for marginalized populations to oppose and challenge oppression. Although several marginalized groups could be identified for this study, I focused on African American and Latino men to narrow a focus on how schools reproduce marginalization.

In the next section, I focus on contextualizing research on African American and Latino male students relevant to the study. Researchers have argued and advocated for this segment of the student population as requiring new approaches in addressing achievement and disengagement rates. These students have been labeled with deficit-thinking language, but based on the work of Swadener and Lubbock (1995) and Funiciello (1993), the next section refers to young men of color through an at-promise framework, challenging oppressive labels.

Young Men of Promise

Varying populations can be categorized under the marginalization definition. Populations based on class, gender, race, and sexual orientation have been identified under a marginalization umbrella. However, for the purpose of this study, I will focus on high school African American and Latino young men of promise. Swadener and Lubbock (1995) and Hall (2006) saw marginalization labels, such as at risk, as perpetuating deficit-thinking models used in curriculum development and support services. At-promise language allows movement beyond deficit models and an acceptance of all children as unique, diverse individuals possessing promise and situated within strengths and possibilities. It is important to note Native American young men of promise

experience similar school achievement patterns within a conquered framework (Jeffries et al., 2002; Spring, 2014; Zinn, 2003). However, this study focused on the state of marginalization of African American and Latino male students from low-income working-class backgrounds who have been identified through research as displaying significant underachievement and disengagement trends in education (Lee et al., 2011).

Oftentimes the achievement rates of young men of promise exist in a discourse framed by achievement gaps. Researchers have believed framing achievement within a comparison and deficit model, where one population is achieving and the other is underachieving, can be problematic (Love, 2004; Perry et al., 2003). However, a large focus of educational research upholds an achievement gap framework (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Fryer & Levitt 2004; Rothstein, 2004). Underachievement and disengagement rates of young men of promise display trends that concern researchers, educators, and policymakers. Studies have shown young men of promise have the highest rates of school failures and dropout along with the lowest test scores. Furthermore, young men of promise have been overrepresented in special education programs and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Aud et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2008; Morris, 2001; Noguera, 1997; Whiting, 2009). Specifically, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), ACT, Inc. (2015), and The College Board (2014), African American and Latino/Hispanic students fall below the 50th percentile on the ACT and the SAT college entrance exams. When looking at 2015 data, African American students placed in the 23rd percentile on the ACT and Latino/Hispanic students placed in the 36th percentile (ACT, 2015). On the SAT, African American students placed in the 31st percentile and Latino students placed approximately in the 38th percentile (The College Board, 2014). Further looking into disengagement rates, African American male students have a 12% high school dropout rate and

Latino male students have a 22.2% high school dropout rate compared to a 4% Asian and 7% white male dropout rate (Lee et al., 2011).

One reason the achievement gap language continues is due to its framing within research. Love (2004) posited current research discussions have focused on achievement gaps that foster a perception of white intellectual superiority. Love explained, even though students of specific Asian ethnicities consistently outperform whites on various achievement measurements, such disparities are never proposed as an achievement gap. Love (2004) stated:

> When white students achieve higher scores on certain standardized tests than African American students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1998), this is labeled an achievement gap. Certain ethnicity groups of Asian students achieve higher scores on standardized tests than white students (NCES, 1998), yet there is no discussion of an achievement gap between white students and Asian students. There is no inference that white people may be inferior to Asian people, either culturally, intellectually, in their communities, or in their family lifestyle or values. It is the privilege of white people to avoid discussion of differences in academic achievement between white students and certain groups of Asian students, and to keep unspoken and invisible any suppositions of the intellectual inferiority of white students. (p. 229)

This unspoken white–Asian achievement gap has contributed to societal beliefs and perceptions of particular groups being superior or inferior. If the white–Asian achievement gap was prominent in society, researchers should find numerous studies on this topic. However, this seems not to be the case, suggesting power relations exist in multiple realms of society and penetrate through economic, political, and social walls, including the walls of educational and scholarly research.

Before moving into this study's contextual implications of African American and Latino male students, it is important to note similar educational achievement rates exist within the Native American male population. The literature has been limited on the academic struggles of the Native American student population, particularly the male segment. Scholars have responded critically to the scarcity of achievement data in national reports and have accused researchers as ignoring the Native American population due to its relatively low overall population numbers (Jeffries et al., 2002). Limited research and dissemination of achievement trends have created an invisible or nonexistent minority of Native American students, influencing an inadequate development of resources. The academic struggles within this population have taken on two forms of achievement trends: (a) low number of high school graduation rates and (b) overrepresentation in special education services (Devoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008).

The unique and complex history of Native Americans may help in framing research on national educational trends. The conquering of land and the elimination process of Native Americans since the establishment of the United States and current overt and covert institutional racism has led to a distinct phenomenon of underachievement and disengagement trends distinct from other groups such as African American and Latino populations (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Spring, 2014; Zinn, 2003).

When considering African American and Latino men, educators should question why these young men of promise experience higher rates of failure and dropout and lower rates of achievement than other groups, such as Asian and white populations. The next section contextualizes African American and Latino young men of promise by addressing historical implications and educational achievement and disengagement rates. Although the research has depicted African American and Latino men as a problematic minority, continuing a focus on

historical and structural influences of achievement and disengagement rates can help focus on an equitable, contextual educational model which is not tied to the social and economic order of the United States (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Burton et al., 1996; Lam, 1995).

African American Young Men of Promise

A substantial body of literature has surrounded the educational experiences and outcomes of young African American men of promise. Researchers and policy analysts have called attention to the social, economic, health, and educational crisis facing African American men since the 1980s. Kunjufu (2001) argued a state of emergency for African American men and questioned current societal and legal disparities, illiteracy rates of incarcerated African American men, and racial profiling. Fultz and Brown (2008) further explained historical literature has demonstrated the role of African American men in American society has been in a state of turmoil since the age of slavery.

Gordon et al. (2009) explained varying frameworks in studying African American male students can take on different theoretical angles. Scholars have argued that most of today's research focuses on oppressive or deficit-focused frameworks emphasizing a Black–white achievement gap, drop-out rates, expulsion rates, overrepresentation in special education programs, and underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs (Moore et al., 2008; Morris, 2001; Whiting, 2009). Other studies take on frameworks focused on examining factors in fostering achievement through mentoring, racial identity, and identification with academics (Awad, 2007; Osborne, 1999; Witherspoon et al., 1997). Researchers have used multiple frameworks in both providing explanations and developing initiatives in addressing the underachievement and disengagement rates of African American young men of promise.

Scholars interested in addressing underachievement and disengagement have promoted a positive approach to investigating components supporting achievement as opposed to negative approaches focused on deficit models. Kivel (1999) supported achievement models that foster African American young men of promise in engaging in a multicultural and democratic society. Scholars focused on explanations of disengagement have also looked to racial identity theory. Racial identity theory focuses on research that psychologically addresses two competing processes within African American young men of promise, including an attempt to erase Black consciousness by expunging any form of Black identity or forming an Afro-American identity which focuses on developing a positive internalized cultural identity (Cross et al., 1996). This framework approaches research with a description of how individuals internalize and react to racial oppression and discrimination (Gordon et al., 2009).

Historical implications of slavery and racism have framed a complex approach that provides embedded explanations for achievement and disengagement rates of African American young men of promise. However, researchers focused on African American education rates have taken other approaches in investigating interactions between African American young men of promise and institutional actors and practices which perpetuate subjugation and oppression (Majors, 2001). Cited in Meyers (2002), scholars have argued for engagement into other structures:

> Social structures that perpetuate racism: a bureaucratic focus on compliance, power-evasive “color-blind” teacher training, administrative disregard of [B]lack parental concerns, and pathologizing of black boys’ cultural styles act, coalesce around exclusions to shape constructions of “blackness” and the materiality of Black life. (p. 774)

Latino Young Men of Promise

Like African American students, Latino young men of promise populate the educational trends concerning researchers and policymakers. However, differing from other marginalized populations, Fry (2009) and Soza (2007) explained Latino men consistently drop out of high school more than other ethnic groups. Disaggregating educational trends reveals more variance within the Latino student population. Fry (2009) reported U.S.-born Latino male students drop out of high school at lower rates compared to foreign-born Latino men. Similarly, groups within the Latino population experience educational achievement in different ways; for example, the dropout rate of Salvadoran men is more than four times the dropout rate of Cuban men (Soza, 2007).

For this study, I focused on Latino men with Mexican heritage, those who have not recently immigrated, and those who are 2nd generation immigrants (or greater) to the United States (Fry & Passel, 2009). I highlighted literature on Latino studies relevant to the investigation and related to cultural similarities in family customs and language. This study's focus on Latino men with Mexican heritage is based on population size; Latino men of Mexican heritage are the "largest group in the Hispanic/Latino/Latina population" (Spring, 2014, p. 133). According to a Pew Hispanic Center report (2009), Latinos with Mexican heritage are "less likely to have completed either secondary education or post-secondary education" (Spring, 2014, p. 148) than those from other Latino groups, such as those from the Caribbean and South America. Finally, Latino men have a higher high school dropout rate at 22.2% compared to 14.8% for Puerto Rican students, 13% for Dominican students, and 8% for South American students (Lee et al., 2011; Spring, 2014).

The combination of recent immigration patterns, along with social, economic, and language barriers provide context in investigating achievement and disengagement patterns of Latino students. Historical implications of the overtaking of Mexican land, the elimination of the Spanish language in public education, and culturally insensitive governmental policies has placed many Latinos into a status of marginalization (Gomez, 2007; Montoya, 1994; Spring, 2014). Education trends of the Latino population point to the possible disengagement with schooling through the resistance of U.S. cultural norms by rejecting "the image of European American culture at the head of a dinner table ruling over other cultures" (Spring, 2014, p. 186) and by retaining cultural values which may not align with school structure.

Research has addressed the growing Latino population since the 1980's where Latinos have become the largest minority segment (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Related to immigration patterns, one segment of the Latino population that has faced distinct educational barriers is the undocumented or unauthorized population. Undocumented Latinos are individuals residing in the United States, but they are not considered American citizens because of birthplace or establishment of citizenship. Undocumented Latino children living within this context develop a unique educational experience compared to other Latino groups in both identity formation and adulthood transition (Gonzales, 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Male Latino students who are undocumented not only face social, cultural, economic, and language barriers in education, but they also encounter legal obstacles impacting achievement patterns and social and economic mobility. Gonzales (2011) argued:

> These youngsters, who committed to the belief that hard work and educational achievement would garner rewards, experience a tremendous fall. They find themselves

> ill-prepared for the mismatch between their levels of education and the limited options that await them in the low-wage, clandestine labor market. (p. 616)

For undocumented Latino male students, legal status and economic barriers add additional layers of complexity which influence education achievement rates, specifically with the barriers of obtaining U.S. citizenship or residency in gaining school financial support, competitive wages upon high school graduation, and other social and political privileges different from Latino men with Mexican heritage who hold U.S. citizenship or residency.

Gandara and Contreras (2009) pointed to social and federal policies as not accepting Latino cultural values, such as language. These policies have negated bilingual education and are argued as a full immersion aim in English-only schooling environments, even though research has clearly supported the benefits of children being bilingual and of using one's first language as a base for developing a second language (Bialystok, 2001; Castro et al., 2011; Nieto, 2000; Zelasko & Antunez, 2000). Gandara and Contreras (2009) called for a more inclusive approach in education to address inequalities; however, they explained the inequalities reinforce the current economic structure relying on social instability. Education as a gateway to social and economic mobility has been argued as being more open to particular groups than others. Groups, such as Latinos of Mexican heritage, face socioeconomic disadvantages, legal discrepancies, and high rates of transience (Garcia, 2009; Pizzaro, 2005; Ream, 2005; Valencia, 1997). These obstacles provide context when analyzing achievement and disengagement trends among Latino young men of promise to expand educational initiatives and opportunities.

The educational landscape of the United States integrates multiple groups of people into a unified system. African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans may simply be rejecting the cultural values and traditions of schooling with underachievement and disengagement behavior.

Spring (2014) believed the U.S. education system will experience conflict between groups at the top of the social order; conflict between those who desire "supremacy of English and European American traditions and dominated cultures whose members want to protect and maintain their cultural traditions" (p. 186). This conflict symbolizes a struggle for groups of dominated cultures vying for inclusion in the cultural, economic, political, and societal structure.

Varying frameworks of research point to possible approaches in addressing the achievement and disengagement rates of young men of promise. Lee et al. (2011) explained researchers focusing on family, community, attitudes, behavior, and morals approach investigations with a culturalist research lens. Such research has focused on the promotion of individual child-centered programs supporting mentorship and personal agency (Guetzole, 1997; Hall, 2006; Holland, 1996; Royse, 1998; Townsel, 1997). Researchers who have emphasized a systemic nature have approached their work through a structuralist lens focused on issues of the economy, class structure, and political and social environments. Structuralists center on broader solutions, including governmental policy initiatives, redesigning curricular teaching and learning, redefining intellectual talents and abilities, and providing teacher professional development (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Dweck, 2007; Gardner, 1993; Hamilton et al., 2006; Jordan & Cooper, 2002; Noguera, 1997; Robinson, 2011; Stovall, 2006). Despite the differences between approaches and frameworks, understanding local structural elements within the schooling process can allow for a deeper look into factors influencing African American and Latino male school experiences and perceptions. A critical interpretative approach is needed to better understand how schools influence the perceptions of young men of promise and lead to a possible reproduction of marginalization. The theoretical concept of social reproduction takes on

many forms. In the next section, I define social reproduction to better understand how it influences societal relations, individual identities, and realities.

Social Reproduction and Society

Building from a structuralist research lens, the theoretical approach of social reproduction can continue to shed light on how social structures perpetuate themselves within today's American society. Social reproduction can exist in all aspects of society, including individual, cultural, social, and economic dimensions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Willis, 1977). Today's theoretical function of social reproduction involves social class as the focal point of reproduction. The focus of class in which the relation of the capitalist is formed between the capitalist on one side and the wage laborer on the other is a development of Karl Marx's concept of reproduction. Marx (1969) stated, "every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction" (pp. 531–532). The concept of reproduction establishes a pattern of relations situated under an economic capitalist perspective where society is built within the structure of capital production. Through the pattern of relationships, reproduction becomes a socialization process, forming a distribution of knowledge and skills feeding a division of labor where the capitalist and wage laborer vie for societal inclusion or domination in the pursuit of capital.

Scholars have argued social production structurally perpetuates social structures and social relations through societal practices, penetrating individual values, beliefs, and behavior (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1997). The practices and mental models existing in the dominant society and situated in a division of labor align or contradict the social and cultural worlds of individuals. Scholars have argued that modern American societal dominant values and beliefs are founded in ideals of individualism, intellectualism, and capitalism which stem from Western

European eras of the Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Industrial Revolution (Burckhardt, 1921; Fromm, 1941; Schiro, 2008; Spring, 1991, 2014). Collectively, these societal values and beliefs make up an American belief structure in the development of perpetuating social relations through social reproduction.

Giroux (1983) posited three forms of reproduction: cultural, hegemonic, and economic. The economic-reproductive model centered on Bowles and Gintis's work (1976), a hierarchical structure that corresponds to the patterns of values, norms, and skills that characterize both the workforce and the dynamics of social practices under capitalism. Young men of promise have been viewed as marginalized liabilities due to educational, socioeconomic, and incarceration trends (Aud et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Moore et al., 2008; Morris, 2001; Noguera, 1997; Whiting, 2009). Outside schooling institutions, young men of promise are influenced by home, peer groups, and other environments, which are governed by cultural, hegemonic, and economic reproductive forces. The social world of young men of promise consists of local elements of home and neighborhood, but also includes macro elements influenced by dominant cultural norms and beliefs in society (Smith, 2000).

Ultimately, macro elements of societal influences of the rhetoric of the American Dream ideology, along with deficit-thinking, education stratification, and ranking affect the cultural and social identities of young men of promise, their academic achievement, school perceptions, and orientation. Within this social reproduction framework, marginalized African American and Latino male youth from low-income backgrounds have two choices. Choice 1 involves conforming to what is expected, assimilating without freedom of choice, and continuing the tradition of accepting dominant ideologies of deficit thinking formed within white/Western European identity. Choice 2 is to resist dominant ideologies, beliefs, and values, while

considering the transformation of societal deficit labels. The following sections address multiple theories related to resistance and schooling while further delving into schools' structural influences on the perceptions of African American and Latino male students and the reproduction of marginalization.

Theories of Resistance and Schooling

Researchers have proposed several theories to understand achievement trends in marginalized youth. This section reviews three theories to understand school engagement of young men of promise. It is noteworthy to point out there is little surprise that children who fully partake in the educative process in the United States have societal benefits to gain. Children who obey the rules or are exempt from them have the autonomy and freedom to engage at the level they choose. All children, regardless of ethnic background, who do not meet the cultural, economic, or socially dominant mold, find themselves under similar resistance or disengagement pressures. Theories of social and cultural identity, achievement orientation, and resistance provide research perspectives with insight into the school achievement of young men of promise.

Social and Cultural Identity

Researchers have often failed to fully capture the dynamic realities inherent in the social spaces and identities of marginalized youth. Ogbu's (1974) ethnographic research on school failures among ethnic minorities asked:

> Can we adequately explain the high proportion of school failures among the subordinate minorities without taking into account the historical basis for their association with the dominant whites and their experiences in that association? (p. 3)

Over the years, theoretical models have become framed within a single social and cultural identity, encapsulating marginalized populations within a vacuum in which no other factors

influence behavior (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Investigations looking to predict achievement and mobility patterns within marginalized populations have developed in the past 30 years (O'Connor, 1999). These studies focused on the relationship between marginalized students' social and cultural identity and perceptions of the opportunity structure of achievement orientation.

According to O'Connor (1999), current literature regularly paints an uncomplicated picture of how individuals perceive achievement opportunity. This uncomplicated presentation limits scholarly insight and negates individuals' simultaneous social realities. To expand theoretical frameworks, scholars have investigated the social dimension of marginalized students by deconstructing the multiple social and cultural identities they experience. The research looks to frame student realities through multiple personal and contextual factors. O'Connor (1999) suggested individuals simultaneously represent multiple varying social identities that influence school performance. These identities can represent race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or others. O'Connor's qualitative findings led to three discourses: dominance, minimization, and contextualization. The multiple social identities in which marginalized students operate begin to phenomenologically unpack complex worlds of achievement orientation and perception.

Further expanding multiple identity theories in which marginalized youth experience the world, Warikoo and Carter (2009) suggested schooling and achievement of individuals is influenced within a complex cultural and racialization process. This process takes form in multiple dimensions of race and ethnicity within the social configuration of schooling. Qualitative researchers have provided nuanced knowledge of the interactions between race, ethnicity, and cultural identities, but paradoxically, individuals cannot be neatly categorized into one or more racial or ethnic identity. Warikoo and Carter argued for scholars and researchers to

identify which aspects of culture matter in cultural explanations of anti-achievement. Specifically, they questioned when and how cultures are linked to race and ethnicity and when these cultural aspects activate within students. For example, Warikoo and Carter cited research that pointed to the consumption of rap music associated with delinquency and opposing cultures (Ferguson, 2000; McWhorter, 2001). Yet, Perry (2002) provided evidence that white teens in suburban schools also have strong preferences for hip-hop and rap music. Warikoo and Carter (2009) further explained:

> Furthermore, it is the teen subcultures of rock, punk, and goth music and styles define themselves consciously as rebellious and anti-authority; however, perhaps, the privileges of whiteness in society immunizes these subcultures from portrayals as deviant subcultures that lead white youth to poor educational outcomes. It is no surprise that the Black-identified subculture is discussed quite differently, given how racial dynamics and forces operate in U.S. society, yet the interpretation of Black-identified subculture and its link to achievement is problematic. (p. 384)

Looking to cultural explanations assists researchers in identifying correlations linked to social behaviors; however, different groups possess idiosyncratic backgrounds consisting of histories, values, and norms dissimilar from one another. As Warikoo and Carter pointed out, white youth may possess immunity to defiant behavior, for privilege may be a cultural aspect of why white students as a whole are not linked to achievement issues in school.

Cultural identity theories look to explain the phenomenon of school failures of marginalized populations with an anti-achievement orientation (Fordam & Ogbu, 1986; McWhorter, 2001). However, Warikoo and Carter (2009) revealed that all marginalized populations cannot be situated into the same classification for racial groups. Asian Americans,

for example, fare better academically (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Kasinitz et al., 2008). Although all marginalized populations do not exhibit similar achievement patterns, for the purpose of improving the life chances of all marginalized youth it would be best to move forward with investigations focused on low-achieving populations. To narrow the focus, research looking at the achievement orientation of marginalized youth would assist in unpacking the phenomenon of low achievement exam scores, school failure, dropout, and exclusion of specific marginalized populations such as young men of promise.

Achievement Orientation

Inquiries into the relationship between perceptions of the opportunity structure and achievement orientation began in the 1950s with early studies of internal–external locus of control (O'Connor, 1999). O'Connor described these studies' analysis of how individual perceptions correlated with motivation and academic achievement that later extends to individuals accepting the tenets of the dominant ideology or achievement ideology of status attainment. Individuals who fare well with achievement ideology are said to have internal locus of control and align their values within the dominant ideology. Those individuals who fail tend to situate their perception within a limited personal efficacy, negating tenets of individual hard work and effort.

Unpacking the role of individual perception of the achievement structure or ideology took on several theoretical frameworks that positioned individuals as conforming or resisting to the achievement ideology of school (Ford, 1992; Ford & Harris, 1996). Studies demonstrating evidence of the acceptance of achievement ideology has suggested high-achieving students' academic persistence is based on commitment to the achievement ideology, and underachievers fail because their perception is situated from a limited reward and opportunity structure based on

their identification of their marginalized status (Felice 1981; Ford & Harris, 1996; Mickelson 1990; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980; Taylor et al., 1994).

Achievement ideology helps to explain the phenomenon of school failures of marginalized populations from an angle of individual perception; however, much of the research has been situated solely on race. Ogbu (1987) and MacLeod (2009), however, considered both social class and race when investigating school failures of marginalized populations. When investigating the school failings of marginalized youth, researchers have become cognizant of the complexity of the school failing process. MacLeod's ethnographic study of marginalized youth suggested achievement ideology is not equitable and does not fulfill achievement for all who conform to it. Marginalized youth oftentimes become aware of inequities within the school, contributing to their behaviors. Their awareness surrounds a false promise generated within the school structure of achievement ideology that simply upholds the existing class structure within a larger structure of society outside the school setting. For students not conforming to society's dominant achievement ideology, scholars have explained resistance develops through refusal and rejection of the school's messages. Moving forward, resistance theory provides the next theoretical lens for why African American and Latino men from low-income backgrounds disengage from the school experience.

Resistance Theory

Giroux (1983) explained that researchers in the United States and other countries have been attempting to move away from social reproduction theories. Giroux's research focused on human agency and experience as fundamental in understanding the complex relationship between school and the dominant society. Students who reject the tenets of achievement that revolve around hard work and effort resist the dominant ideology through disengagement or

challenging power dynamics in the school setting. This occurrence is labeled as resistance theory and regards notions of opposition, conflict, and struggle.

Giroux (1983) explained resistance theory operates from the rationale of school being the social site structuring the experience of subordinate groups. This approach allows for researchers to frame oppositional behavior as acts based on moral and political indignation rather than deviance and learned helplessness. This theoretical perspective promotes critical pedagogy with an understanding of power, resistance, and human agency. Giroux posited an approach which focuses on teaching and learning and not the phenomenon of underachievement rates of marginalized populations. He saw critical pedagogy as creating pedagogical models for new forms of teaching and learning, challenging current understandings of social relations.

Further scholarly examples of critical pedagogy and understanding power, resistance, and human agency are critical resistance, justice, and transformation. Aspects of social hierarchies have influenced individuals' social spaces; however, through collective activism, forces can be created, breaking down oppressive systems. Davis and Dent (2001) highlighted research on prison systems and defined critical resistance "as a loose network and a campaign, rather than a member organization, joining people whose work touches on prison issues but is not primarily defined by them . . . to fight together against the prison industrial complex" (p. 1235). This collective effort is what Davis and Dent referred to as a joining of forces between activists and cultural workers in challenging dominant, oppressive systems. They argued individuals must consider the role criminology plays in providing architectural models and methods of identifying populations, not only within race, but within gender, creating a prison industry that profits from increasing numbers of prisoners through the siphoning of social wealth away from schools and

hospitals, “producing the conditions of poverty that create a perceived need for more prisons” (Davis & Dent, 2001, p. 1238).

Although Giroux (1983) and other scholars have promoted resistance theory, social reproduction may allow a focus on the rationale for why African American and Latino men from low-income backgrounds disengage from the American Dream ideology. It is essential to challenge the education system to redefine and restructure itself due to the status of the bankrupt model argued by Ladson-Billings’ (2006) education debt framework. Resistance and transformation have been argued as activist approaches challenging oppression, but they lie within the social spaces and realties of the individual or collective group. In other words, the dominating system or structure can be challenged by marginalized groups, but if marginalized groups continue their marginalized status, then the system of exploitation will perpetuate. Marx (1969) explained that cooperation of the individual or the wage labor being exploited perpetuates exploitation. Similar to this phenomenon, Gilmore (1999) cited the example that “workers who must congregate in a factory to produce goods constitute a fundamental social unit capable of rising up and expropriating the expropriators” (p. 27). However, when considering all children and young men of promise, this study questions not the actions of the individual or groups of individuals, but rather the authoritative structure in which impressionable children live their social realities.

Rather than focusing on teaching and learning of resistance by challenging dominant ideology, it may be fruitful to revisit social reproduction theorists Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) correspondence theory. This theory could provide a better understanding of structural influences on underachievement and call upon a democratic and contextualized model addressing the

educational structure of standardized achievement. These education structures have afforded privileged populations greater social mobility opportunities and punished marginalized populations with further penalties through school failures, dropout, and possible future circumstances of poverty and imprisonment.

The Reproduction of School Marginalization

Looking at African American and Latino young men of promise hailing from low-income and/or working-class backgrounds, it is important to understand how schools reproduce marginalized youth. Although Bowles and Gintis' (1976) correspondence theory has been criticized for being incomplete in their analysis since its publishing, both scholars continued to support their original theory of schools producing future workers through the socialization of beliefs, values, and forms of behavior. However, they have continued their research with additional theoretical positions, giving credence to noncognitive and cognitive effects of education (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Bowles and Gintis (2002) attributed their return to their original research to their belief that schools have continued to fail at providing an education "unimpeded by prejudice, lack of opportunity for learning, and material want" (p. 1). They have continued to advocate for a system of education aimed at a more prosperous future and productive economy by establishing equitable sharing of benefits and burdens. This dissertation uses Bowles and Gintis' (1976) correspondence theory as an approach to critically investigate schooling objectives and processes to explore how schools may influence the academic and disciplinary outcomes of marginalized youth. Embedded ideologies within social systems relating to schooling, such as the American Dream ideology and stratification and ranking using standardized exams, contradict an equitable contextualized structure, stifling opportunities for all individuals to be at the top of an economic and social order.

Conservative and radical scholars alike research to understand achievement rates of low-income African American and Latino young men of promise, but approaches and frameworks will differ. Where a segment of researchers will focus on improving the achievement of young men of promise by emphasizing their at-risk or deficit labels, this study investigated the structural influences, experiences, and perceptions of African American and Latino male high school students and questioned if the educative process better serve marginalized youth and expand opportunities. To answer these questions, scholars look to better understand the school structure by investigating local elements of school expectations and rules that dismiss cultural identities and oppressively affect young men of promise.

Expectations of the School Structure

Public schools in the United States have a relatively short history that remains embedded in American ideals born out of the Industrialization period (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). Scholars have posited the modern school's structure as a promotion of American values and norms supporting the larger cultural, economic, and political structure of society (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 2012; McLaren, 1999; Spring, 2014). It is uncommon for schoolchildren children who match values and norms accepted by the greater society to exhibit oppositional behavior to what may be argued as a dehumanizing education system perpetuating inequalities and marginalization through deficit and outcast systems of school failure, dropout, and delinquency (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 2009; Ravitch, 2013; Spring, 1989).

Schooling as an institution operating under the American Dream ideology and supported by U.S. economic and political structure has been argued as an indoctrination system supporting labor ideals (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Hargreaves, 1967; Hochschild, 1995; MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 1997; Willis, 1977). Those who work the hardest are granted upward mobility and those

who work contrary to the desires of authority are dismissed opportunities through school actions. These actions include school suspensions, when marginalized young men of promise are disproportionately disciplined (Raby, 2012). Ideals relating to academic behavior are reinforced through grading systems of the school, where students who complete the most homework are marked higher on grading systems. Students who conform to behavior expectations and who obey authoritative orders from teachers and administrators are recognized through positive deliberation.

Raby (2012) explained school rules inherently possess an embedded history connected to cultural values linked to gender and class-based preferences and behavior. Rules (e.g., no hats in the building) connect to a patriarchal Catholic tradition that requires subjects' obedience to state and social organizations. Because school rules are connected to norms of particular groups, Raby's research has debunked school rules as being neutral and favoring inside groups aligning with cultural values, thereby negating outside groups (Annamma et al., 2013; Brantlinger, 2006). Furthermore, Raby highlighted that school rules on behavior may have to do more with discipline being something to be mastered rather than a school practice connected to student learning.

With regard to academic and behavior expectations, students who receive a high NCE percentile rank and obey the rules of the school receive reward recognition through school awards, college acceptances, and scholarship opportunities. Students who have a low NCE percentile rank and who do not obey the school rules are offered little opportunity to exit their possibly already marginalized status. The standardized achievement model could have more to do with being a hegemonic gate-keeping device, silencing outside groups, or could be described as a student learning system. If the standardized achievement model is a gate-keeping system

rewarding privileged populations and punishing subordinate groups, then the choices young men of promise have to exit this status of marginalization come into question.

One choice is for African American and Latino men to obey and conform to authoritative expectations but also suppress and dismiss their identity or inner expectations. This choice becomes a phenomenon referred to replicating authoritative ideology. Fromm (1941) argued submissive behavior arises through a process of owning capital through societal mechanisms leading to limitations in values, indicating:

> In any society the spirit of the whole culture is determined by the spirit of those groups that are most powerful in that society. This is so partly because these groups have the power to control the educational system, schools, church, press, theater, and thereby imbue the whole population with their own ideas; furthermore, these powerful groups carry so much prestige that the lower classes are more than ready to accept and imitate their values and to identify themselves psychologically. (pp. 112–113)

This imitation process transmits ideals that benefit societal expectations situated in economics but may negate internal ideals and values situated in forms unrelated to economics.

Schools' expectations originate in a belief system within a hidden curriculum of control and conformity (Apple, 2019; Jackson, 1968). Scholars have argued that school rules support the expectations of school as an institution of authority and gateway for individuals to obtain social and economic mobility. Students who adhere and conform to expectations move up the social and economic ladder, whereas students who oppose become situated in a system of discipline and punishment (Apple, 1995; Jencks, 1979). Understanding this phenomenon will take an understanding of internal ecologies of the school and classroom (Collins, 2009; Smith, 2000).

Under the umbrella of social reproduction, Bowles and Gintis' (1976) correspondence theory allows researchers to frame their research on school experiences and patterns of marginalized youth. Bowles and Gintis posited correspondence theory as identifying how norms and values taught in school correspond to future employers through a capitalist school structure where elite individuals are trained to accept their roles at the top of the class economy (managers) and where trained workers accept their lower places at the bottom of the class economy (laborers; Mehan, 1992). This theory helps explore an aspect of achievement patterns of marginalized youth in that the capitalist structure places competitive forces on children through reward and punishment systems. Those students who socially and culturally possess or adapt by conforming to the achievement tenets of the American Dream ideology are rewarded through the school benefits of awards, scholarships, and college acceptances, positively affecting social mobility.

Social reproduction theorists have argued that lower-class students who do not socially or culturally conform, resist, or reject school rules and objectives become situated into a reproduction system, repositioning them into the lower economic and social order of society. For outsider African American and Latino low-income children born into circumstances outside their control, a future of exiting a marginalized status becomes bleak in a reproductive system. As one researcher highlighted, "Children of the rich do better in school, and those who do better in school are more likely to become rich, we risk producing an even more unequal and economically polarized society" (Reardon, 2011, p. 111). Therefore, the reproduction of marginalization can begin with (a) low-income children changing their cultural or economic circumstances or (b) the school, to begin analyzing how its structure punishes or rewards

children who fall outside normative development frameworks or white middle-class backgrounds.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) explained schools have become institutions producing skilled labor armies sustaining economic viability in the United States. This influence has altered and manipulated human development, whereby the economic and political structure dictates the personal development of children to fit the economic needs of the production of goods and services. Bowles and Gintis further explained that in the past century or so, schools have contributed to the reproduction of social relations largely through the interplay between school and class structure. Ideas of having children develop in their own timeframe according to what Bowles and Gintis (1976) referred to as their own "inner natures" (p. 130) or what Marcuse (1964) referred to as "inner freedom" (p. 10) has become unfathomable because human nature is established and in constant interaction within social structures.

The school is a hegemonic structure composed of rules, objectives, and expectations embedded within dominant cultural beliefs of an American Dream capitalist ideology (Annamma et al., 2013; Au, 2009; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Smith, 2000; Valenzuela, 2005). Important to this investigation is how this structure influences the perceptions of low-income African American and Latino male youth. Students who inherently fit into the American Dream ideology for various factors based on race, gender, and class ultimately possess the highest levels of social mobility. These students oftentimes are from inherited backgrounds and positioned on the privileged right side of the bell curve with higher socioeconomic resources. These children also test higher on high-stakes achievement exams and are rewarded with educational benefits and upward social mobility (Edsall, 2012; Reardon, 2011). Although hard work and effort play a role

in achievement rates, the structure ultimately plays the largest role; all students are not positioned equally.

The winners of the American Dream ideology are labeled successes and seen as economic assets rewarded with social mobility benefits, whereas the losers are labeled as marginalized and are seen as social liabilities. The “losers” may be punished with school failure and delinquency or drop out as an act of rejecting dominant ideological expectations. Although low-income African American and Latino young men can often resist a marginalized status, the cost is high. For those who resist and become winners by overcoming socioeconomic and cultural barriers, many face a loss of personal, social, and cultural identity, questioning who benefits from their success. For the students who disengage from the American Dream and are considered losers, an American nightmare may become reality. Many of these students will live and survive in society, but oftentimes they face future life circumstances involving poverty, despair, and legal punishment (Lawrence, 2007; Mehan, 1992). In the end, what the future holds for young men of promise who do not meet or conform to the dominant American Dream ideology is questioned.

Unlocking the Black Box

Through a reproduction framework, I sought an understanding of how schools influence the perceptions of low-income African American and Latino male high school students which contributes to the reproduction of marginalization. Through a critical interpretive investigation influenced by the work of Smith (2000), I hoped to identify and analyze (a) the official rules, objectives, and expectations of the school these men attended; (b) participants’ perceptions of how their schools viewed their social and cultural perspectives and identities; and (c) ideas students may have on how to improve their schooling experience. The school as a socialization

institution situates students, teachers, and administrators into a particular structure influenced by internal and external forces. A qualitative methodological approach combining observations, interviews, and document review provided knowledge of low-income African American and Latino male high school students' understandings and interpretations of their social worlds. The next chapter discusses this approach.

Is it possible that a school's structure of rules, objectives, and expectations reproduce marginalization in low-income African American and Latino male youth? Or, are marginalized students simply at risk for their social and cultural identities (O'Connor, 1999; Ogbu, 1987; Warikoo & Carter, 2009) and circumstances place them into predetermined roles in society—the bottom of the economic and social hierarchy. According to Smith (2000), investigating marginalized youth through a critical interpretative framework, informed by reproduction and resistance theories, can unlock and examine the "black box" of schooling (Mehan, 1992). Identifying only the social and cultural identities of marginalized youth would simply see these students as at risk for their constructed realities may not meet the dominant American Dream ideology existing in the school structure. Furthermore, perceptions of the opportunity structure and achievement orientation of marginalized students also suggests these students operate from a deficit orientation, placing them within an at-risk label in which the accountability falls on the individual and not the system (Valencia, 1997). Therefore, a qualitative investigation focused on understanding the high school experience of African American and Latino men helped unlock the black box of schooling and the reproduction of marginalization by focusing on how the school's structure influences the perceptions of young men of promise.

Smith (2000) called into question past approaches of quantitative research on marginalized populations. The positivist paradigm of quantitative research frames investigative

questions leading to limitations in findings. Is it possible that marginalized youth fail in school due to a dominant ideology structure? Scholars looking to find answers view this argument based on undemocratic governing structures (Chomsky, 2000; Giroux, 2012) leading to a reproduction of dominant ideology. Smith argued quantitative researchers tend to avoid critically interpreting school objectives, social interactions, student perspectives, and agency that can limit research investigations of marginalized student experiences and outcomes. This limitation points to a failure in critically investigating the phenomenon of marginalized students' school attitudes, behaviors, and performance. A paradigm shift from a quantitative cause–effect or correlation technique to a qualitative phenomenological method has led to asking questions framed in enhancing an understanding of school experiences of marginalized youth aimed at improving life chances by expanding contextualized initiatives and opportunities.

Social inequalities in the United States have plagued the American education system and have impeded the life chances of marginalized youth. Students from middle-class, affluent, and elite backgrounds have higher rates of academic achievement that allow for greater social mobility when compared to their marginalized counterparts. As Kearns (2011) cited, past research has pointed to social inequalities correlated to race, class, and gender reproduce and sustain school practices (Fine & Weis, 2001; Kozol, 1991; Thomson, 2002). One critical aspect of the education system that creates the reproduction of inequalities has been argued as existing within the formation and continued use of high-stakes standardized testing (Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000). An investigation of local elements to understand the school experience and school's influences on the perceptions of African American and Latino male high school students has furthered this research area.

Conclusion

Are low-income African American and Latino male students doomed to sit at the bottom or be outcast from the social and economic order of the United States? Silencing and oppressive cultural and social hegemonic tools, such as high-stakes standardized tests, the bell curve, and the American Dream ideology would certainly lead to an answer of “yes.” Undemocratic systems of stratification and standardized high-stakes testing will continue to reproduce phenomena of student failure, dropout, and achievement gaps unless researchers begin shifting the paradigm on how to best investigate underachievement. Can the possibility of improving student achievement and engagement be better situated in a newly formatted school structure with objectives toward accepting student identities, developing new models of assessment, and better matching educational goals correlated with natural human development? Can this happen without applying a standardized achievement model or common curriculum which Noddings (2013) stated as possibly placing “democracy at risk” (p. 34)? Similar to Noddings, 40 years earlier, Cross (1971) described an education system:

> Surely quality education consists not in offering the same things to all people in a token gesture toward equality, but in maximizing the match between the talents of the individual and the teaching resources of the institution. . . . Educational quality is not unidimensional. (p. 209)

As Valenzuela (2005) stated, the standardized achievement model silences and negates students’ cultural and social identities. Educators and policy makers often ask if there is a better way. For Bowles and Gintis (1976), there is. Bowles and Gintis posited an idea of public education that can produce new, equitable results that enhance student educational opportunities and promote a more viable economic future. Both scholars believed reform is needed that begins with

programming and policy to favor the development of democracy, open enrollment, adequate financial aid for needy students, and development of anti-discriminatory content of education. Ninety percent of the U.S. population is channeled through the ideologies, beliefs, and practices structured in public education (Snyder, DeBrey, & Dillow, 2019), and until all individuals possess adequate income and equal access to resources, the standardized achievement model possibly reproduces current inequalities, perpetuating the social plagues the United States continues to see within marginalized populations, including school failures, dropouts, prison rates, social pathologies, and poverty.

Chapter III. Methodology

In this study, I looked to understand how low-income African American and Latino men (young men of color) viewed their school environment with respect to school rules and policies reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies. I wanted to understand how the school structure treated these young men who, in my opinion, are young men "at promise" and full of potential as opposed to "at risk" and deficient (Hall, 2006; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Valencia, 1997). As research suggests, these at-promise young men are overrepresented in special education, underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, and they experience high rates of school failure, delinquency, and dropout, while facing future life circumstances involving poverty, despair, and legal punishment (Aud et al., 2010; Lawrence, 2007; Mehan, 1992; Moore et al., 2008; Morris, 2001; Noguera, 1997; Whiting, 2009). To begin addressing underachievement and disengagement rates of low-income young men of color, this study aimed to better understand the schooling experiences and perceptions of these young men and share research findings useful for school improvement efforts.

Given the complex socialization process of youth within a nonneutral context of schooling (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 1983; Raby, 2012; Willis, 1977), this critical interpretive investigation was informed by reproduction and resistance theories. The following sections lay out the theoretical framework, methodology, and methods to be employed in collecting and analyzing data.

Theoretical Framework—My Lenses

The theoretical framework of this study was informed by American Dream ideology and anchored within critical theories of marginalization, reproduction, and resistance (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; Hargreaves, 1967; Hochschild, 1995; Kearns, 2011; MacLeod, 2009;

Smith, 1997; Te Riele, 2006). Beginning with American Dream ideology and marginalization, followed by reproduction and resistance, this section explores theories connected to influences on perceptions and social realities of participants in this study.

Education has been promoted as an essential means to achieving the American Dream, enabling all students to achieve material and social success through hard work and effort (Hargreaves, 1967; Hochschild, 1995; MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 1997). The American Dream is framed within an equal opportunity structure; however, conflicting evidence has suggested the existing structure is not equal and not accessible to everyone, possibly leading to inequalities within marginalized groups (Annamma et al., 2013; Au, 2009; Freire, 1970; Brantlinger, 2004b; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1994; Valencia, 1997). Scholars have suggested the American Dream within the school system is connected to a capitalist society. In this capitalist society, oppressive inequalities are needed to sustain a social and economic hierarchy in which dominant groups remain at the top and subordinate groups remain at the bottom (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Hochschild, 1995). Historically, student populations outside the dominant culture, such as low-income young men of color, begin the schooling process within a marginalized or socially disadvantaged position and exit the schooling process within the same marginalized position.

Although the term marginalization has been used throughout this investigation, as noted in the literature review, the term "at risk" has reigned over educational research. As argued by scholars, at risk possesses a deficit-based approach, holding individuals accountable for their at-risk circumstances rather than considering the complex social, political, gendered, racial, and economic factors contributing to one's particular circumstances (Gonzalez, 2001; James & Taylor, 2008; Thomson, 2002; Valencia, 1997). Understanding marginalization will assist in

framing this investigation through an approach that analyzes influences that socially disadvantage groups of students and the social and cultural perceptions linked to them (Annamma et al., 2013; Au, 2009; Brantlinger, 2004a; Gould, 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Ogbu, 1974; Raby, 2012; Valencia, 1997).

The theories informing this study provide a structuralist lens in understanding macro elements influencing the schooling process of youth. The first theory to be discussed is social reproduction. This theory frames an understanding of how participants' perceptions are impacted by their schooling experience within a reproduction structure. Social reproduction theorists have perceived the education system as upholding the reproduction of social and class inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 2009; Willis, 1977). Through a social reproduction framework, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued schooling practices corresponded with the needs of the economy and mirrored unequal labor-market relations as a requirement of capitalism.

Reproduction is also said to take place within other social dimensions. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) explored reproduction in institutions and identified it as knowledge and skills established by dominant cultural capital (e.g., language, high-brow activities, social mores, and expectations, good grades and high levels of educational attainment). Both scholars argued dominant forms of cultural capital and other types of capital (e.g., social, economic, symbolic) further influence the reproduction of social and class inequalities. I use Bowles and Gintis' correspondence theory in this study as a form of social reproduction embedded in schools to serve as a basis of understanding how schooling upholds labor-market driven social and class-based inequalities.

Although reproduction served as one of the lenses of this study, resistance served as the other. Resistance theorists have viewed the school as a social setting situated within a cultural and ideological conflict (Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). Schools as social sites are designed within conflicting ideologies, surrounded by dominant and subordinate cultures (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Such theorists have suggested schools attempt to instill social identities within students, and students may actively oppose this process. This opposition, referred to as *resistance*, is based on class and cultural resources (Smith, 2000). As students resist the school's attempt to impress a Western European or middle-class white identity onto them, their resistance to this force can result in school failure from two points of resistance. One resistance is that of rejecting cultural or socioeconomic identity, and the other is the rejection of oppressive structures which may be unconscious to marginalized youth.

On the first point of cultural or socioeconomic identity resistance, studies by MacLeod (2009) and Willis (1977) illustrated how student agency and resistance to school rules and values can occur. In both studies, low-income youth resisted the school's imposing process on their identity and furthered their disadvantaged circumstances. Resistance theory helps explain that youth who hail from diverse social and cultural backgrounds resist the instilling of dominant identities leading to possible school failure. Their own resistance is often socially reproduced, not as a solution but as a form of opposition.

Although other theories can be used within this investigation, reproduction and resistance allow for the researcher to analyze the impact of social and class inequalities within a school environment reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies. Researchers have argued that the school lies within a dominant Western European middle-class culture which negates the social and cultural identity of low-income youth falling outside the dominant culture (Annamma et al.,

2013; Brantlinger, 2004b; Horowitz, 1983; MacLeod, 2009; Raby, 2012). As a result, these youth oftentimes perceive formal aspects of their schooling in a negative light and ultimately do not identify with their learning institution, leading toward questions of what schools can do to change this narrative; how can the perceptions of marginalized youth help develop it?

To add to reproduction and resistance research, I reviewed school documents to examine rules and expectations on academic achievement, dress code, and student behavior by linking and critiquing them through the lens of student interview responses and school hallway and cafeteria observations. This critique allowed me to understand how school rules and expectations reproduce norms and values corresponding to the labor force, along with how they are nonneutral and contain racially driven ideologies. This critique also helped me understand how students in this study began a transformational resistance process by forming ways to address their concerns with their school.

Methodology

This qualitative study used an interpretivist/constructivist and critical theory (critical interpretative) approach. A central characteristic of qualitative research is developing an in-depth understanding of the social context of research participants and their lived experiences. Argued by Smith (2000), using a qualitative (instead of quantitative) design when researching marginalized youth in schools provides an approach that facilitates a critical investigation of the school as a social institution grounded in a sociopolitical context. To best answer the research question of how low-income African American and Latino men view their school's dominant cultural values and ideologies, this study used a critical interpretative approach to uncover the school reality as constructed by the participants. As the researcher, I was interested in investigating the school perceptions of the research participants. Specifically, I wanted to know

their actual lives through their school experiences, struggles, and achievements beyond categories and boxes that tend to constrain their lives.

Mertens (2005) described the interpretivist/constructivist approach as gaining an understanding of the reality as socially constructed by individuals**.** Within my inquiry, this approach allowed me to understand the school reality as socially constructed by the participants. This investigation relied upon participants' views and recognized their background and experiences to link to and ultimately answer the research question. Smith (2000) further argued that an interpretative design allows researchers to uncover how meanings and reality are constructed by individuals. Based on this approach, the participants in this investigation have constructed their reality and perceptions through the interaction with their social world of schooling. Moreover, the data collected from this study went beyond an interpretivist/constructivist approach and applied a critical assessment to the research data. Merriam (2002) suggested that in critical research, "the goal is to critique and challenge, to transform and empower" (p. 327). In critical theory, research is viewed as being intertwined with politics situated within social structures of inequality. Cited in Posthuma (2010), Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) defined critical theory as "an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within society" (p. 291).

Rationale for Research Approach

To seek an understanding of what Jorgensen (1989) referred to as an ordinary, usual, and typical routine nature of a setting, I collected data through observations, interviews, student records (academic and disciplinary), and school documents on rules and expectations to understand the participants' social world in its natural state of the school. To better describe and interpret the culture of the school environment, it was helpful to gain direct experience within the

cafeteria lunch area and hallways to provide a foundation for truth and understanding of the participants' school setting (Douglas, 1976; Geertz, 1973; Lofland & Lofland, 1971). I spent 3 weeks as a nonparticipant researcher in the cafeteria and hallways by observing students interacting with adults, peers, and the rules of the school. I introduced myself as a researcher to faculty, and because the school site was quite large, students viewed me as a substitute adult supervisor. Being an observer allowed me to gain insight into the social setting and culture of the school and acquire knowledge of what shaped the worldview and behavior of the participants (Merriam, 2002).

Interviewing participants, as Bailey (2007) explained, allowed me to investigate how each participant constructed meaning of their school experience through their perceptions. Seidman (2013) suggested that very little research on schooling in the United States involves the perspective of students and other agents within the school. Interviewing student participants in this study helped shed light into how each individual sees their world within their own school experience and perceptions.

Methods

This research was an examination of the school experience and perceptions of a selected small group of young men of color. To best capture research participants' experiences and perceptions (i.e., social realities), I used qualitative research methods of interviews, observations, and document review of student records to understand students' school engagement and document artifacts that outlined school rules and expectations. The following sections further lay out the elements that guided this study. Specifically, the next sections describe the site and sample selection, participants, consent, assent, confidentially, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and a discussion of ethical issues.

Site and Sample Selection

I received the approval of DePaul's Institutional Review Board and the school administration, along with guardian permission for students under 18, assent by invited research participants (students under 18), and consent from students 18 and over. The site selected for this study was Conquest High School (CHS; a pseudonym). CHS was selected based on its mission focused on academic achievement, along with its socioeconomic and demographic changes since 2000. CHS is a large public high school located in a suburb of a large city in the Midwestern region of the United States. CHS is a moderately affluent/middle-class suburban high school with an approximate enrollment of 3,000 students; at the time of data collection, an estimated 25% (5.6% in 2000) of students were enrolled in free and reduced lunch (i.e., a governmental subsidy for students from low-income families). The student body had shifted from a 61% white student population in 2000 to 18% in 2018. During this investigation in the spring of 2019, Conquest had an enrollment of 70% African American, 8% Latino/Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 3% multiracial student population. Opposite from CHS's large student of color population (82%), a majority of faculty and staff at Conquest was white. CHS's faculty and staff was made up of approximately 83% White, 11% Black, and 4% Latino/Hispanic teachers. Like many high schools in the United States, Conquest holds a mission and vision which set standards and expectations of students who attend. Cited within several of CHS's school documents, Conquest's mission and vision is to prevail as an institution which provides the greatest expectations in academics and personal growth by improving the quality of life of students by upholding the highest standards of intellectual growth, along with occupational, emotional, social, and physical development in an expanding global world. Conquest holds a belief in the fundamental worth and dignity of all individuals through the recognition of diversity among all

backgrounds, abilities, and student aspirations. Conquest further expects all students to learn and gain the knowledge and skills needed to obtain success through taking the most rigorous course of study to prepare and achieve high test scores on the ACT, SAT, and AP exams.

Recruitment and Sample Selection

After receiving approval from DePaul's Institutional Review Board and from the school district, I recruited students by collaborating with the school's counseling office. As a former employee of Conquest High School, I was familiar with current school counselors and confidentiality protocol. I collaborated directly with the head of the counseling department and requested permission to work with the office as an educational researcher to complete the work of my dissertation. I requested the school counselors pass out flyers in their office and the lunchroom to students they determined would be interested in participating. I also asked the counseling office to provide flyers to teachers. These flyers provided general information about the research project and requested that interested students contact me directly for follow up (e.g., verbally acknowledge interest, email, phone call, by stopping by the school counseling office). I asked students selected for the study to meet me after school in the school counseling office to go over a general description of the study. They were asked to provide their guardian a written invitation for their child's participation. For students 18 and over, a consent form was provided. Interested students under 18 years old and their guardians were provided assent forms and permission forms for my review of their school academic and disciplinary records. Upon receipt of student assent forms, I informed each participant under the age of 18 that I would contact their guardian to provide them the same general description of the study. I asked their guardian, if they approved, to sign the permission forms and return them directly to me or give them to the student to bring to school.

After 2 weeks of recruitment, I requested the counseling office run reports of the students who submitted consent and assent/permission forms and identify which students met the following criteria: ethnicity (African American and Latino), sex (male), free and reduced lunch status, grade point average (low "C" grade point average or under), and disciplinary record (15 demerits or more). After a 2-week period, nine students followed up with all necessary documents to participate in the study and take part in 1-hour semistructured interviews. In addition to participant semistructured interviews, this study also used two other forms of data which included school document artifacts and field observations of CHS which took place within a 3-week period.

Informed Consent

Six out of the nine participants in this study were under the age of 18. I provided informed assent forms to these minor participants and permission forms to the guardians to gain affirmative informed agreement to participate. The remaining three 18-year-old participants were provided consent forms. Participants and guardians received a brief explanation via phone conference and email regarding why students were chosen based on their gender, ethnicity, and school standing; specifically, participants were chosen as young men of color who were disengaging from their school and wanted to provide feedback for school improvement efforts. Participants received written information about the study which outlined the purpose, procedures, timeframe, risks, and benefits of the research study. Covered during phone and email contacts, I also attached a written explanation of the voluntary nature of the study; participants could choose not to participate at any time without consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits. There were unexpected delays when communicating, resulting in multiple returned phone calls

and emails with guardians of the 17-year-olds in this study; however, I was able to schedule all interviews within a 2-week time frame.

Participants

A small group of nine young men of color between the ages of 15 and 18 participated in this study. Specifically, I selected four African American and five Latino men from low-income backgrounds. By working with the school counseling office as the principal investigator, I was able to find a group of students who met the criteria for this study.

This study focused on a small selection of low-income young men of color for two reasons. First, this study involved an in-depth approach in collecting authentic data to understand participants' school experiences and perceptions. Unlike quantitative research, generalizing is not a goal of qualitative research, and this study sought to capture the lived experience of a small group of students and contextualize their perceptions of school to better understand reasons for their academic and behavior disengagement. Second, having a smaller sample of participants allowed for saturating the data to ensure comprehension and completeness (Bowen, 2008). Saturating the data with a smaller sample of participants avoided a threshold of receiving diminishing returns in which the researcher is no longer receiving new data relevant to the study (Morse et al., 2002).

Confidentiality

Throughout the study, I collaborated with school personnel, explaining I would conduct research throughout the school to complete my dissertation. Student information was deidentified by blacking out names, student identification numbers, or any other identifiable criteria from their records. Participants were coded by student numbers assigned in the order of receipt of assent and consent forms. Students' data were stored electronically on my personal password-

protected computer. Recordings of interviews were saved on a digital recorder stored in a locked work desk drawer. All field notes and academic and disciplinary records were kept in one pocket folder in my locked work desk drawer along with the digital recorder.

Pseudonyms of all individuals participating in this study and the school were used. Recordings were deleted from the digital recorder once I transcribed them and checked them for accuracy. All electronic data will be permanently deleted and all school records and field notes will be shredded three years after research has been completed.

Data Collection

Within a 3-week timeframe of this investigation, three forms of data were collected, including (a) semistructured participant interviews, (b) research site observations, and (c) school document artifacts. To begin, I describe the interview process I conducted with nine research participants. Each participant was interviewed once within a 3-week period of the study for approximately one hour to answer the questions in the interview guide (see Appendix A). Interviews took place after school in CHS's counseling office. If answers were not provided for all questions in the interview guide, the interview was extended past one hour Interviews of the participants were semistructured. This study used an interview guide covering topics connected to participants' school experience, achievement orientation, social and cultural identity, and school rules and expectations. The interview allowed me to gain an understanding of the experience and perceptions of the participants through their responses to topical questions. Suggested by Bailey (2007), semistructured interviews are particularly useful within interpretive or critical paradigm frames of research because questions are connected to specific topics to be analyzed. The intent of using a semistructured interview format was to engage in dialogue with interviewees and allow for the flow of the interview to determine when and how a question was

asked (Bailey, 2007). A semistructured interview in this study provided the opportunity for participants to freely respond as the interview progressed. Bailey explained interviewees can often answer a question before it is asked, leading to a reworking of question order. Bailey (2007) also explained field researchers who use an interpretative paradigm tend to lean toward semistructured and unstructured interviews, and researchers who situate their work within a positivist paradigm tend to use structured interviews.

Interviews in this interpretative study were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Upon completion of all nine interviews with the 3-week investigation, digital recordings were electronically submitted to a transcription agency. Transcriptions of all interviews were returned to me via email 2 weeks after I concluded data collection.

The second form of data collected in this study were research site observations at CHS, collected through field notes. I observed the interactions between students and school personnel. I focused on the enforcement of school rules. During observations, I took short notes in a researcher journal and transferred them onto a field note template which included a date, summary, and narrative of the day’s events. Observations took place in the front entrance hallways and cafeteria during the morning, lunchtime, and school dismissal. The selection of the hallways and cafeteria was primarily based on observing behaviors between students and adults when school rules were being addressed or violated. Observations, along with informal conversations with school personnel, were recorded within my research journal. Students and adults who were not research participants were not identified and were only used to contextualize several lived experiences that arose from research participants’ interview responses.

In addition to research site observations and participant interviews, the third form of data collected in this study was the collection of school artifacts (e.g., student records, curriculum

guides, parent-student handbook, district policy statement, and newsletter). These artifacts were used for analysis and understanding the school context regarding the enforcement of rules and policies that established the academic and behavior engagement and expectations of research participants. Academic and discipline records of the participants were collected. These documents helped outline school rules (codes of conduct) and policies which provided cultural and social context through a reward and punishment system, establishing and influencing academic and behavior expectations of students attending Conquest.

I aimed to capture genuine responses of school perceptions by working with a small sample of nine research participants in this investigation. Although there is a larger number of individuals who fall under the categorical umbrella of marginalized youth, this study sought to capture the subjective feelings and reactions of a small sample of low-income African American and Latino young men of color to generate authentic data about their unique lived experiences. The data collected from the interviews were collected to capture the experience, feelings, and overall perceptions of the participants and were not directed toward establishing objective facts (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). No incentives were provided for volunteers; this decision helped create an authentic space. The authentic aspect of this study helped gain participants culturally honored status of reality through their lived experiences and perceptions (Miller & Gassner, 1997).

Data Analysis

For this investigation, I used an overall qualitative analysis approach. Through sifting, charting, and sorting key issues and themes, I was able to develop my overall interpretation of the data collected. First, I reviewed transcribed interviews and reread several times for accuracy. I then used an inductive approach for analysis. According to Patton (2002), inductive analysis

allows for themes to flow from the “analyst’s interactions with the data” (p. 453). I coded interviews, school documents, and notes from my researcher journal that included school observations. In the initial coding process I used Bailey’s (2007) process of reading and rereading interview transcripts and reviewed school documents multiple times, noting codes that represented emerging concepts, ideas, or themes. This repetition process allowed me to extract various codes to gain some degree of continuity of codes across multiple data points I collected. Secondly, I organized my initial codes into separate groups by finding similarities among initial codes (Bailey, 2007). Once groupings were developed, I used a focused coding method to distinguish and assign larger categories into groups they linked to. I delved deeper through focused coding within thematic categories to examine similarities, differences, and nuances within the data (Bailey, 2007). I then thematically categorized the themes to write my findings. After the process of inductive coding that revealed themes and concepts from the data, I viewed the themes through a critical interpretative approach using my theoretical lens of the American Dream ideology anchored within critical theories marginalization, reproduction, and resistance (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; Hargreaves, 1967; Hochschild, 1995; Kearns, 2011; MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 1997; Te Riele, 2006).

Trustworthiness

To evaluate the quality of data collected and analyzed, I used four dimensions of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) model to make certain rigor existed as an observable component of the research. The four dimensions of creditably, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used as criteria. Lincoln and Guba’s model addressed how trustworthiness, made up of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, could be established within this investigation. This model helps researchers and readers know if the data and interpretations

approximate the truth. In regard to adolescents and the complexity of individuals' social reality, determining the truth was not straightforward. The next two sections unpack the four dimensions of Lincoln and Guba's model and present the strategies used in this study to ensure trustworthiness.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined credibility as ensuring the study makes a credible interpretation of the data gathered. Credibility allows readers to make clear connections between (a) their interpretations of how the participants expressed themselves and (b) how the researcher presents the data. Secondly, transferability relates to how this study's findings can be applied to other contexts. More specifically, transferability allows the findings to have meaning beyond the results in this study. As a result of this investigation's small and purposeful sample size, I the results are not transferable to all contexts, but the findings have similarities when applied to a similar research context focusing on low-income young men of color's school experiences and perceptions at a suburban high school.

The next dimension is dependability, which allows for the reader to see the logic of the documentation and traceability at each point of the study. The final dimension of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model is confirmability. This dimension relates to how the researcher ensures the findings of the study are influenced solely by the participants' perspectives and views rather than the researcher's perspectives. Confirmability helps guarantee that the bias, motivations, and interests of the researcher do not taint or manipulate the data (Schwandt, 2001).

I implemented the following strategies to ensure trustworthiness: thick description, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail (Creswell, 2003; Holloway, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first strategy, thick description, or the use of rich data and verbatim quotes from interviews (Holloway, 1997), allows for readers to receive a rich, descriptive account of

each observation and interview linked to school document expectation themes. Thick description allows for each recorded account to present the setting, body language, speaker's tone, and facial expressions so readers can gain a clear impression of each observation and interview that was linked to expectation themes. In essence, thick description means quoting from the data to allow the data to speak for itself.

Second, member checking was implemented in this study by having participants check the emerging analysis that occurred during each interview. Member checking in this investigation was used to confirm accuracy of coding as a guide for analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After each interview section, I checked and clarified with participants whether I interpreted their response accurately.

Third, peer debriefing was implemented in this study by sharing the process of the investigation and analysis to a disinterested peer to explore aspects of the investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I debriefed with an educator from a different school who was familiar with my research. I provided general information and requested feedback. This process allowed for an opportunity to explain, defend, and question conclusions to ensure the ongoing investigation made logical sense to those outside the study.

Finally, an audit trail was retained to allow for detailed documentation to be available if research was questioned. The audit trail provided all notes, thoughts, and decisions made to document the process that led to the end results. In addition to peer debriefing with an educator, this study also used a peer review checkpoint to obtain trustworthiness by having a doctoral candidate with human subjects training from DePaul University, a peer who was familiar with my work and my research interests, offer critical feedback on analysis and interpretation (Taylor et al., 2001; Tuckett, 2005). My peer reviewer read my analysis after each section and pointed

out areas that needed clarification and asked questions on my overall analysis. After I made corrections, my peer reviewer would reread and confirm clarity.

Conclusion

The methods of this study allowed for an analysis of participants' experiences and perceptions and how they related to their school's rules and policies. By focusing on the primary research question of how low-income African American and Latino men viewed their school environment with respect to school rules and policies reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies, this critical interpretative investigation provided an opportunity for students' experiences and perceptions of their schooling to serve as a critical link between them as individual agents and their school as a socialization institution. The next chapter presents the study's review of school documents, research site observations, and participant interviews at CHS.

Chapter IV: Student Backgrounds

The nine research participants in this study had home-life and school struggles. In the following section, I provide a summary of each participant's personal, academic, and disciplinary backgrounds. This section helps develop context for each student's personal and family circumstances learned through their interviews, along with their individual voice of what can be improved with their overall experience at Conquest High School (CHS). See Table 1 for participant information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	GPA	Demerits
Pito	18	Latino	1.76	20
Smalls	18	Black	1.69	18
Tyson	17	Black	1.81	40
Isaac	16	Latino	1.61	15
Denzel	18	Black	1.54	53
Lopez	17	Latino	1.70	73
Big Bob	15	Latino	1.00	66
Pookie	17	Black	1.21	53
GoGo	15	Latino	2.15	77

Note. All names in this study have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants. Demerits were assigned for disciplinary infractions for violating school policies on attendance, electronics, dress code, and behavior. Noncompliance, insubordination, insolence, and fighting were assigned the greatest amount for demerits. Students with 25 demerits or more were reviewed for suspension and students with 75 or more demerits were reviewed for expulsion.

Pito

Pito was an 18-year-old Latino student in his senior year at CHS who wanted to become a firefighter. Academically, Pito struggled in school and failed multiple classes in English, math, and science. His disciplinary record had numerous demerits for excessive absences, multiple tardies, being disrespectful, and wearing his hat within the school building. Pito came from a single parent household and worked over 20 hours a week. Since his freshman year of high school, Pito worked to become independent and continuously sought out job opportunities, even when he was not of legal age. Pito claimed:

> I had a couple of jobs. I had . . . My freshman year, I worked at a [Mexican] restaurant, I worked . . . I was bussing. It doesn't count as an actual job 'cause I did get paid under the table, so that wasn't on my resume and all that, so . . . That would help just because I did work there for a decent while, and, you know, people look for people who have experience and all that. Then after that, my sophomore year, I worked at an [Amusement Fun Park]. That was just basically just a job just to have extra money . . . Then this year, I actually went down . . . It took me a long time to get a job, 'cause that's 16–17 range is kind of hard for you to get a job. And luckily, I killed it in my interview. She said that impressed her so I got the job. And Target is like an actual job, it's not like not getting paid under the table, then working at a kid's place, doing karts and all that.

Throughout segments of Pito's interview, he shared experiences of neglect growing up which he felt led to many frustrations at home and in school. He often alluded to feeling he had to teach himself everything he learned because his father was not in his life. He commented, "My dad left when I was two, so I never really had that guy figure in my life . . . I was just always . . . Learned everything myself."

Outside his home life, Pito felt CHS often singled him out. He did not understand why he could not express his opinion, especially to adults he felt were treating students unfairly. Pito wanted a more independent schedule at CHS to meet his job obligations and to be treated with more trust and respect as a young man. Pito shared he would like CHS to start school at later times of the day:

> If I was to do one thing, I would kinda do more like college ways . . . You could pick your classes' times, throughout the whole day. Some people have those night classes and everything. I feel like since you have to wake up early every day, some of the kids can't like . . . My second period, say, I have a test that day, as soon as I wake up, am I really gonna be ready for it? Not really. I feel like if they started school just a little bit later.

Pito's interview revealed unmet personal needs with trusted relationships due to an absent father. He was selective with who he trusted and felt students should be able to pick and choose school personnel with whom they felt more comfortable. Pito said:

> Now, it was kinda like how I'd pick [my classes]. I feel like if I kept on having my math teacher who was great. He really helped me out with so much . . . a lot of people like the same math teacher, so [I realize] everybody would pick him. So it's kind of like some of the stuff, of course, the school probably wanna do 'cause you would wanna go to your teacher, 'cause then you would act the best way in your class and your teacher, but some of the people like certain teachers, so everybody would try to go to that teacher. . . . So I feel like some of the stuff the school wants to do, but they physically can't.

Pito felt that CHS was too strict with safety rules. He thought CHS should stay open more and allow students to come onto campus whenever they needed. It seemed Conquest was a trusted environment for Pito, which contradicted his negative perceptions of his school experiences. It is

possible that locked doors at Conquest was perceived by Pito as sending a negative unsafe message to students. Pito indicated:

> The whole locking the whole doors thing, that's terrible, and the whole . . . I mean yeah, it's for the safety, but either way, say someone tries to come and let's just say, kill us or whatever. There . . . What is a lock really gonna do to them? They're trying to come and hurt us all, so they're just gonna break the glass either way . . . Locking the doors after everybody leaves, that makes sense. But during the school days, I don't like that all, locking the doors.

Smalls

Smalls was a tall 18-year-old Black senior being raised by his aunt, but he would periodically see his mother. Smalls expressed a disinterest in the school subjects he was studying and did not want to talk about his father much because he passed when Smalls was young. He was able to share some information about how he felt, but he preferred not to go into too many details. Smalls explained:

> I live with my aunt because . . . Well my mom, she works a lot. She does a lot of work, so I just live with my aunt . . . And then, one point my mom . . . She works a lot, so she's there, but she's not there. . . . My dad passed when I was in seventh grade.
>
> Roberto: Did that impact you at all?
>
> Smalls: Yeah, I got more antisocial, I guess. Started blaming myself for a lot of things. I just distanced myself back, I guess. I still have my moments, but . . . I think the hardest part was seeing everything unfold in front of me, and not being able to do anything.
>
> Roberto: And you said you have your moments, is that what you mean by that? Do you have . . .You come to points and you just really miss him? Or having him around?

> Smalls: Yeah, or I don't wanna be bothered. And then that's when I don't come to school and I just stay at home.

Similarly, Smalls felt uncomfortable talking about his mother. He described his relationship as up and down. Smalls felt their relationship was impacted by the loss of his father. Smalls continued:

> Me, my relationship with my mom, it's pretty . . . It's iffy. Sometimes we're fine, sometimes we're not, which is one of the main reasons why I don't think I'm just immediately going to an out of state college, because of our relationship. I don't just wanna leave and have a bad vibe towards her when I leave.
>
> Roberto: Is she hard on you? Does she . . .
>
> Smalls: She's not hard on me. She's just very distant.
>
> Roberto: Okay.
>
> Smalls: Yeah. So it's like once I lost my dad I feel like I lost her.

Since he was young, Smalls expressed that he did not like school because of waking up in the morning and being given lots of work to complete. Smalls talked about liking school a little more as he grew older, but things became harder. Now in his senior year, Smalls shared that he did not like school even more because of all the added responsibilities he had. Like Pito, Smalls worked a lot of hours during the week and would not get home until one in the morning. Smalls described:

> I really never really liked school. Then towards, I got towards being older, I started enjoying it a little bit, I guess. Like I said, my first two years were fine and then the last two years I just slacked off and didn't care anymore.

Roberto: Okay, can you talk a little bit about your . . . When you said you didn't like school before, a little bit about that?

Smalls: I think it was just waking up early in the morning and being bombarded by work, first thing you got into school.

Roberto: Okay. And then when you're speaking, if you could speak just a little louder, okay? Just so I can understand . . . And how about current? You said that . . . Do you enjoy schooling more now than before?

Smalls: Probably not because I have more responsibilities and stuff now. So I work from maybe 5:00 to like 12:30, get home at 1:00 and then I wake up 6 hours later and come back here, so it's a lot.

Smalls came across as a gentle giant with a beaming smile, but he felt frustrated with CHS's rules. Smalls had the most demerits of all participants; infractions ranged from violating tardy, electronic, and dress code policies to insolence and insubordination. Although Smalls felt frustrated at times with CHS, he expressed an appreciation for attending Conquest. However, he also felt the school was not preparing him for life.

Smalls wanted to enter the military and felt Conquest did not offer any classes and programs that would assist him after he graduated. Smalls felt schools should offer more classes that specifically prepared them for fields they were interested in. Smalls also felt that school rules were unfair and should be reviewed, especially policies on tardiness. He mentioned:

> One of the main reason I would change school is, around junior or senior year, having classes that deal with whatever career they wanna get into once they graduate. I know we have welding and stuff like that. Those are just like a couple of things, but there are a lot

> more careers that we can be preparing for in high school, so once we get out, we'll have a little bit of knowledge about doing it.

Smalls felt the tardy policy should be reviewed since he felt that it was not equitably structured. In the interview, Smalls shared:

> Tardy policy, that's one I would definitely change. Three tardies . . . I feel like being a minute or two late to class and being a minute or two late for three times, that does not all equivalate for a whole 5 hours on a Saturday. That's three times being a minute or two late. That's six minutes, maybe nine.

Tyson

Tyson was an athletic 17-year-old Black junior who felt his short size did not match his determination and strength. He was not certain what he wanted to do after he graduated next year, but he alluded to entering the military because he wanted to be the best he could be and help others. Tyson shared, "My dreams is to basically be the best man I can be, to be . . . and basically help other people."

Out of the nine interviewees, Tyson expressed the most frustration during his interview. He did not know what exactly was causing it, but he recognized he had personal struggles impacting his schooling. He recalled:

> Some days have been harder than others because of, I guess, my own person issues I have. And sometimes it affects my schoolwork and I have to really try to get back in the mindset of getting my work done. It's just . . . Some days it's just . . . I have to be in my own head, it's like . . . It's just like I just can't seem to focus cause somethings are like really just there and I just can't seem to get my mind off that.

Tyson came from a single parent home and expressed feelings of being alone, "Sometimes students go through stuff and they feel like they have no one to talk to." His relationships at home and with his friends were based on him feeling the need to be a protector, leading to several school disciplinary incidents. Tyson shared that he lost many family members and friends over the years. He was struggling, knowing his mother was suffering from chronic health issues and the possible loss of another friend. I asked, "You mentioned that this year has been the hardest at home, has there been other years that have been hard as well?" Tyson responded:

> Not as hard as this year. It was just hard because my mom had got real sick and that had opened my eyes a lot. It made me feel like, "I'm risking losing the person that I really care about and love." And then, another incident had happened I almost lost . . . I'm sorry.
>
> Roberto: Take your time.
>
> Tyson: I almost lost someone very close to me. He had attempted suicide, and it really hurt me because I really cared about that person. And I felt like . . . 'Cause I knew I could've done something to help him. But it's just hard, 'cause when you wanna do something for them and just . . . They have their head space of how they feel, and you just can't do anything about it, but it hurts to know that they were that low in their life to wanna take it. And they feel like dying is better than living. And that's what really hurt me the most was that I was gonna lose him.

I asked Tyson how he felt about CHS's rules, and he shared of a recent dispute he had with another student:

> I got into a incident with this . . . quarrel with a student defending another student. And I guess, I would say, I wasn’t in the right head space. Well, I really wasn’t trying to listen, I was just . . . Saw one thing, and I focused on that, and I guess my temper kinda made me react in a way that I wasn’t supposed to react in a school environment.

Tyson had a mix of disciplinary demerits for not complying with school ID and tardy policies. He also had several incidents for fighting, disruptive behavior, and insolence. Tyson shared that he did not always agree with CHS’s rules and that they sometimes contradicted themselves. He stated, “I feel like sometimes school’s rules implemented for certain students are not really the voice for all students.” He felt taking an oppositional stance to Conquest’s rules was more important to help his friends than meeting school expectations.

Tyson offered some insight into ways he thought Conquest could improve. Out of all of Conquest’s rules, Tyson did not like dress code rules. He commented, “The headwear and the dress code bugs me the most.” Tyson thought that Conquest should look again at their dress code policies because he did not fully agree with them. Tyson also felt teachers should help make learning more fun to engage students, and students should express their voices. Tyson did not place all the onus of learning on the teacher. He felt teachers should make learning more engaging. However, students should also be responsible for advocating for themselves because teachers will not know what students need unless they speak up. Tyson mentioned:

> Choose one thing to change right away, like right now? It would be the way students learn in the classroom, like I was saying earlier, our classes can just be straight to the book, and that can be very boring for students. And maybe some students don’t learn like that, you have to make it basically for students to want to learn. So you can’t just go off paper, boring lecture, you have to make students want learning to be fun. Also students

have to say it ‘cause if you don’t say nothing about it, teachers are gonna keep going with the same program, with the same thing they’ve been teaching for however long they’ve been teaching for like, 10, 11, 15 years, however long they’ve been teaching for, they gonna keep doing the same pattern. And the students tend to think that this pattern isn’t helping them. You have to be able to stand up and say like, “Hey, I don’t like . . . This is really confusing me.” You have to be willing to work with the teacher because sometimes teachers don’t know.

Isaac

Isaac was a 16-year-old Latino in his sophomore year. During his interview, Isaac expressed interest in becoming a mechanic and entering the military. He struggled in school and received mostly D’s in his English, math, and science classes. Out of the nine research participants, Isaac shared the most traumatic experiences. Within the last five years of the interview, Isaac was stabbed, sold drugs to help his family’s finances, and survived a car shooting. Over the years, Isaac had transferred to several different schools. He felt school was a challenge for him because of meeting new people and adjusting to different settings. He shared:

> Past school was hard. I’ve transferred to many different schools . . . school wasn’t easy . . . sophomore year was a little bit more difficult making friends since it was such a bigger school and meeting whole different people with whole different personalities compared to my freshman year.

Because Isaac moved a lot, he had a different perspective compared to the other participants. He shared largely positive experiences at Conquest and felt safe.

> Roberto: Describe how you feel in school within your . . . in the classroom, in the hallways, and in the cafeteria.

Isaac: I usually feel pretty good in all three of those areas. There's nothing too much I worry about. I don't really feel too in danger.

Isaac also expressed that Conquest's neighborhood was quite different from his past neighborhoods. In the following conversation, Isaac described:

Roberto: How does this neighborhood compare to your past neighborhoods?

Isaac: This one's actually very good, 'cause it's very quiet and not a lot happens. If you hear about a shooting, and that's very rare over here. But comparing to my past neighborhoods, that was very common, that was almost something that shouldn't even pop up on the news since it happened so recently, everybody's gonna know about it.

Isaac had the least number of disciplinary infractions. This might have been the case because he was only at Conquest for about 5 months when the interview took place, and he felt keeping a good image was important. He stated, "Your image is the first thing that people notice about you. So I feel like it's good to keep it clean and keep it good, wherever you go." In the past few months, Isaac had disciplinary demerits for failure to comply with Conquest's school ID policy, excessive absences, and cutting class. He felt Conquest had high expectations, especially with dress code, behavior, and tardy policies. He continued:

I feel like [Conquest] has high expectations of how you should dress . . . And how to act, they usually want you to act normal, good behavior, good . . . Not talking back and stuff like that . . . I feel like this school's rules are more strict than others, because when it comes to going to class or getting to class on time, they're a lot more strict.

Isaac expressed a high level of frustration and disappointment with his father. He felt that his father was an adult child who treated Isaac's mother and family as if they were nonexistent. Isaac did not like his father and explained that he had alcohol issues:

> My father is not a good one, drinks a lot and never pays attention to his responsibilities. He needs to grow up and stop gambling. We never have money to pay for food and bills, so I would do my best and sell weed to help my mom.

Overall, Isaac had the most positive perception of Conquest and was grateful for attending after transferring from other schools. Isaac felt Conquest was safe and was grateful for the opportunity to attend. Isaac would not change anything, indicating:

> Truly, there's no way to actually change this school, 'cause to other schools that I've been to, this school is, education wise, it's been good . . . Usually, coming into school, I don't have too many expectations, but getting a good education, having good teachers that respect, and students that also respect. But coming into this school, it was a lot more than I expected. It was a lot more respectful and a lot more to handle compared to my last schools.

Denzel

Denzel was an 18-year-old Black student in his senior year at Conquest. Denzel was raised with a mix of his grandmother and mother, but he had some contact with his father. He talked about having issues with his father revolving around family finances but was working through them. I asked him, "Can you talk about your dad?" Denzel responded:

> He'll say how much I sucked and stuff, 'cause I thought I was being a burden on him, 'cause we had it so . . . We had kinda . . . We wasn't stable financially and stuff, so he'll say that kids suck . . . I feel like I just noticed that my dad put me through some stuff and he may not be the worst dad in the world, hands down or not, but he might as well have been, in my opinion.

Denzel moved from the inner city into the middle/upper-class suburbs surrounding the CHS community. He shared several experiences of witnessing violence before he moved and felt grateful to be in a better-resourced environment. Like other participants, Denzel had both academic and behavioral struggles. He failed multiple math classes and received mostly D's in the classes he passed. Denzel talked about not liking school and found it difficult. He commented, "Basically, throughout school, I never really liked school, 'cause I felt like I wasn't good enough to be in school 'cause I have learning disabilities." Since freshman year, Denzel received multiple demerits for infractions for excessive tardiness, cutting class, noncompliance of having school ID, and profanity. Most recently, Denzel was in danger of being expelled from Conquest for a fight he had with another student.

Denzel's life goal was to become a boxer. Denzel loved to box and felt he did not fit into Conquest's environment. He shared that he did not connect with his classmates. He often expressed that Conquest was bougie (snobbish) and ignorant to the hardships in life for people who did not have many resources. Denzel remarked, "It's safe in this community, people try to make it just seem like it's either this hood school or it's just a bougie school. I feel it's more on the bougie side of me." Denzel talked at length about people not understanding him and his personal struggles, saying:

> I don't really connect with most people at [Conquest] because of how they was brought up and when I tell some of my story that make them just, need to tell my story, I'm just crazy so and so . . . I felt kind of stuck up. I feel that because . . . I never go on no vacation. I never really had a stable home until now even though I thought I did, it really wasn't. . . They're not into none of that stuff.

> Roberto: How would you describe your relationships with teachers and other staff members, counselors, dean, security, coaches, and principal?
>
> Denzel: I feel like me as a whole I kind of dismiss connections with teachers and staff, but I will say I had a couple altercations with teachers and deans because of just my temper. Also, the fact that I feel often provoked, so I kinda overexaggerate something, and I feel like it could have been different but I also feel there are certain things that need to be addressed more.

Denzel expressed more about issues at Conquest than other students in this investigation. He moved into the CHS community from the inner city during junior high. Denzel's unmet needs of security and safety contributed to his feeling that Conquest was not a school for inner city Black students. He stated:

> I feel that school and stuff, I feel there are certain things about [Conquest] as a whole school that needs to be addressed for kids or someone like me, and I feel this school would be an amazing school if it would just do things like that, but I feel that school isn't necessarily meant for kids that come from these backgrounds where it's not the best start. 'Cause I know that I didn't have the worst start in life, but I will say that a lot of kids at [Conquest], I said some are really kind of sheltered, not necessarily got that much adversity.

He felt disconnected from Conquest, and he felt his teachers and classmates were unaware of the realities of poverty, theft, and violence that occurred only 15 minutes away in the inner city. He commented, "My experience was all about shooting and stuff. So it's already . . . I done heard gun shots all the time before [Conquest]."

Denzel expressed an unmet need of feeling accepted for his social and racial identity. Throughout Denzel's interview, he made clear that Conquest could do a better job of helping low-income Black students feel welcomed and part of the school community. He stated, "Because Conquest, like every school does not accept me as a Black man, it's gonna be hard no matter what." Denzel felt he would never be accepted by Conquest or society for being Black because of the way he dressed, behaved, and spoke. Denzel acknowledged an unfulfilled dream because Conquest did not provide students opportunities to meet individual occupational aspirations. When asked what ideas he had to improve his school experience, Denzel emphasized helping students learn social expectations and developing students' physical talents:

> I would just have more programs for kids who don't see that their potential pretty much. Like social skills, more options like gym class, you take some kid aside and say "hey you could [be] like some [physical] freak of nature but they don't wanna do that." In certain situation but you can't neglect the main part of school even though I do feel it's pointless. I mean, I could choose to spend 7 hours just training [for boxing] or something, I would, not go to school [if I didn't have to].

Lopez

Lopez was a 17-year-old Latino junior and the most animated of the research participants. His family moved into the Conquest community during seventh grade. Lopez was from the inner city and talked about his current neighborhood being much better than before:

> Roberto: Is it a better neighborhood?
>
> Lopez: Oh, much better.
>
> Roberto: Can you describe that?

Lopez: You would have to padlock the doors like four times in the old neighborhood. In this one, sometimes we go to school and we go to work, 'cause the house is empty for a couple of, let's say, around 8 or 9 hours, and there's times where the door is just . . . The garage door and the door is just left wide open. And then when we come back at night, it's completely untouched.

Roberto: Have you had any past experiences in your old neighborhood, for the locking of everything?

Lopez: Actually, yeah, I have. There was . . . It was a couple of years before we moved. There was a gang shootout two houses down from where we were, and the whole neighborhood was on lockdown for 24 hours. And they were trying to hide out, and they broke into the house next to ours, and we were just praying that they didn't come to our house.

Lopez did not say much about his parents but did share that he was close to both his mother and father. He also shared his parents and siblings did not speak English fluently. Lopez was extremely open on sharing his experiences at Conquest and his own negative self-perceptions. He was comedic and candid with his responses, especially on the topic of Mexican stereotypes. He joked, "I consider myself a smart boy, others might just see me as a Mexican who just cuts the grass." Lopez connected well with school friends but felt he could not hang around with them during the school day because they were Mexican:

My school friends, [chuckle] we call them homies now. The boys. We have a good relationship, but when it comes to school, can't really hang out 'cause then we're all Mexican, and then they're gonna think we're some esés or whatever. Kind of what happened earlier in the school year, how they saw a bunch of African American kids

> hanging out and they thought they were gang bangers. They all got basically subpoenaed, in a way. And it's just they all had to go to meetings or get suspended.

Lopez had some struggles with connecting with female students and teachers. He did not understand why he could not joke around with his female teachers about sexual innuendos and female stereotypes, for which he was written up on a couple of occasions. Lopez labeled himself a troublemaker who teachers targeted, influencing his oppositional stance against Conquest's rules and expectations. He attributed his troublemaking to his ADHD and felt profiled after accumulating multiple disciplinary demerits since his freshman year. Lopez was also one of the most forthcoming and honest participants when discussing his disciplinary record. He had several tardy policy and cutting class demerits, but most of his write-ups were for insubordination and insolence. Lopez felt that if he was disrespected, he had a right to respond.

He shared a few times he got into trouble but did not fully understand why he was in trouble. I asked him, "Can you talk about your past and current school experiences?" Lopez replied:

> School, I've always been a troublemaker, because I have ADHD and, basically, I feel the more I try to get away from trouble, the more it comes for me.
>
> Roberto: Okay. Can you give me an example of that?
>
> Lopez: I currently have 73 demerits and I have not gotten written up in 3 weeks and it's just, I feel like I'm being targeted, trying to get in trouble and all that by the other teachers, because I just try to stay on my Ps and Qs and I just, they're trying to get me.

In terms of how to improve his school experience, Lopez shared individuals can improve school experiences. He felt he could have used more support for his unmet needs regarding appropriate social interactions. Lopez felt the dress code was strict and that Conquest wanted

them to dress to their expectations. He stated, “I feel like people should be able to dress whatever way they want. And the school takes it upon a big deal if they don’t dress the way they want.”

Lopez expressed that Conquest contributed to students’ unfulfilled dreams. At the end of his interview, Lopez shared Conquest should find better ways to support students connecting with their personal and career interests by allowing them to take more elective courses outside of academic graduation requirements. Lopez wanted to become a chef after graduation but was unable to take elective classes that would prepare him because of his struggles in his core graduation requirements, specifically in his English courses. Lopez shared:

> I’d say [school] is pretty fine the way it is, it’s just the people in it. The adults, they derail you. Yeah, but [Conquest] also limited me. So I couldn’t take culinary, in one of my first three years, so I couldn’t, so I can’t take Advanced Culinary [in my senior year]. So then now, I have to basically go to culinary school and take a culinary class for the first time.

Big Bob

Big Bob was a 15-year-old Latino freshman who grew up most of his life in a single-parent household until recently with his mother having a new relationship. Although his mother did not remarry, Big Bob would refer to his mother’s boyfriend as a sort of a stepfather. He shared language barriers with his mother and stepfather who did not speak English fluently.

Big Bob was open to sharing his anger struggles but did not necessarily label this issue as anger. Besides being written up for being tardy to class multiple times, classroom disruptions, and electronic policy violations, Big Bob had a few insubordination infractions. He discussed different times he would talk back to teachers. He commented, “I don’t know if she did this on purpose, but this girl . . . This teacher once messed up my grade. In the past I talked back to her,

so she didn't like me in the first place." He felt the need to take an oppositional stance against school rules because being respected was important to him; he described:

> I just get really mad, and I just don't feel like talking to anybody, and I don't know if it's anger issues. I feel like I don't have anger issues, but some people do say I do. It just depends if you disrespect me, I'm gonna disrespect you back.

Linked to respect and anger struggles, Big Bob had the most disciplinary infractions with fighting. He felt fighting was an appropriate way to settle disputes. Big Bob described a time when he hit a student who he felt deserved it:

> This kid, he kinda took my money, and so he was just . . . He just . . . He was gone for the whole week after he took my money, and so I was just wondering where he was. And I confronted this one guy, 'cause he said he likes to steal a lot, he said he didn't take it. And I believed him, and I don't really don't think he took it. 'Cause otherwise, why would he say somebody else took it? He's just trying to take it off him. And so I was just thinking it was probably him and I kept on confronting him. So he kept on . . . He kept on laughing, thinking it was a joke, and I just thought that that was rude, and so I just . . . I couldn't hold it in. And so I just . . . I just hit him.

Outside of fighting, Big Bob enjoyed being active and participating in sports, especially boxing. In terms of academics, Big Bob failed multiple classes in English, math, and science. Throughout different portions of the interview, Big Bob talked about not liking school and struggled with homework. He also commented about not getting along with some of the adults in the building when I asked him, "Can you talk about your past and current school experiences?" He replied:

> Some teachers just a little bit rude, but that's with all schools. I started getting bad grades and stuff, and then this year is been kind of rough, too . . . I can't do homework, it's just too much . . . With the teachers, I like most of them. Some of them I just don't get along with. Guidance counselors, they're nice. I don't really talk to any of them. The deans are pretty good. I don't like one, but I'm not gonna say his name.

Influenced by his extended family members, Big Bob wanted to have a career in landscaping or become an electrician. Big Bob felt Conquest could do a better job hiring teachers who know how to work with youth. He also felt Conquest should expose students to practical life skills by working with money. Mentioned in an earlier part of his interview, Big Bob alluded to Conquest contributing to an unfulfilled dream of students' future life goals. He felt Conquest should connect students with job opportunities related to their career interests because the school did not teach skills directly related to his interests in landscaping or becoming an electrician, explaining:

> I'm pretty sure they [Conquest] already do this, but make sure to look on the past, if any records of teachers and stuff, and see how they deal with kids. Maybe put them in summer school before they go to actually teaching. Yeah, more options connected to our job interests. Maybe teach us more. I feel like we need to learn about paying bills and stuff. I still don't know how to do that.

Pookie

Pookie was a 17-year-old Black male in his junior year at Conquest. He was the most soft-spoken and reserved of the nine interviewees. Pookie described feeling alone at Conquest. He explained it was because he wanted to stay out of drama and liked to keep a small circle of friends. Since his freshman year, Pookie received disciplinary demerits for fighting, excessive

absences, cutting class, disruption, and insolence. When asked what he wanted after graduation, he shared he wanted to go into business in either sales, real estate, or become an entrepreneur.

During his interview, Pookie discussed how instrumental his parents were in his life. He explained his parents decided to move out of the city when he was young to give him more opportunities. Pookie shared he lost friends to gun violence when he was in his elementary years. He did not understand why his grades and behavior were seen as issues at Conquest, but he wanted to be like the students to whom Conquest gave positive attention. Pookie felt Conquest favored students who met their expectations at the academic and behavior level and said, “I see a lot of favoritism but like . . . It’s mostly with kids good in sports and school.” Pookie did not see Conquest’s favoritism as an issue but rather as an opportunity to change personally. He remarked, “School have helped me to see a lot of things like this year, I was trying to see I have to do better for myself.”

Pookie struggled with his classes, especially in math and science. He had to repeat both algebra and biology after failing biology once and algebra twice. In the following conversation, Pookie explained:

> Roberto: What are your feelings about the types of subjects you are learning in school?
>
> Pookie: Math, really bad at it, not my strong suit but . . .
>
> Roberto: How does that make you feel?
>
> Pookie: To be honest, it kinda make me feel slow.

One of the reasons Pookie struggled in school was expressed by his general feelings about school. He stated, “Sometimes at school I just get bored a little bit or just tired, don’t feel like doing stuff at times.” Another issue Pookie shared that impacted his grades was an experience he had when he was younger. He remembered:

Roberto: Do you remember what were some of the things that contributed to your grades slipping?

Pookie: Oh, losing friends. And then in third grade, I had lost my best friend.

Roberto: Can you describe how?

Pookie: To gun violence.

Compared to other interviews, Pookie was the shortest with his responses but shared some ideas about how to help his schooling experience. Unlike other students in this study who had negative experiences at Conquest and felt profiled, Pookie felt Conquest was a school where he wanted to meet expectations. He felt appreciative of being at Conquest and felt obligated to his family who he cared for, especially because they worked a lot to afford to stay in the community. I asked Pookie to describe how the school had helped or not helped him. He replied:

> School have helped me to see a lot of things like this year, I was trying to see I have to do better for myself . . . Seeing my mother worked two jobs. Seeing my family just . . . Everyone in my house they have jobs. My family, they are amazing people. I love them. I care for them. They're like my heart.

Although he appreciated attending Conquest, Pookie described some students as causing issues. Pookie described Conquest as a school having good teachers but some disorderly students:

> The teachers here at [Conquest], they are amazing. I don't have many friends, but the people are nice and cool. It definitely is a good school.
>
> Roberto: Can you describe a typical day in high school?
>
> Pookie: A typical day in high school, here, it's okay. Sometimes it can get crazy.

Roberto: Okay, can you start from the beginning and talk about the craziness? Maybe from the morning until you're done after school, and all through the day like an average day?

Pookie: In the morning when I get here, it's cool. Same people smile. And then throughout the day, just as we go to classes, it's alright.

Roberto: And how about . . . You said, "Crazy," right? What were you thinking about when you said, "Crazy"?

Pookie: There's been a lot of fights and extra stuff going on here.

Toward the end of his interview, Pookie shared Conquest was a good school with many opportunities. Out of all nine research participants, Pookie was the only one who felt he should change his behavior and identity to meet Conquest's expectations of success. He did not offer many ideas to improve his school experience but did provide a few that would help him personally do better at Conquest. Pookie shared that he should get more involved in school and be allowed to stand up during class and listen to music to stay focused. He also talked about wanting Conquest to have more alumni as guest speakers to share their success stories in their careers, sharing:

> Yeah, with me I would say, "I don't know what to do with the school, but I should of get more involved into the afterschool activities." Because it could help me.
>
> In class I will say, "Because music it really helps me focus, if we could listen to our music a little bit more while we are doing our work, it would help."
>
> My teacher, he had this [mentoring] program for young men . . . Yesterday they had brought in people that had made it from this school like became successful, and how they

> became successful, and how they worked to become successful . . . it would help a lot, because the students would take more from that.

GoGo

GoGo was a 15-year-old Latino student who was an English as a second language learner his freshman year. During his interview, GoGo talked about becoming a nurse and playing soccer in college. He thought nursing would be a good career because his mother wanted to become one but never received the opportunity. GoGo also shared that he liked hearing about nursing after connecting with a male nurse at a career fair.

GoGo came from a single parent household and gave a lot of credit to his mom for raising a family on her own. GoGo disliked school but felt he was starting to see it in a different way because of his brother; his older brother attended CHS. During his interview, GoGo referred to his brother as being a better student who did not get into trouble like him. He explained:

> I hated school, because I thought it was a waste of time, ‘cause at that time . . . You know how people, they have older brothers that already graduated, I didn’t have any. My brother was two years older than me, so I didn’t know how important school was, but now I know how important it is.

GoGo shared his mother emigrated from Mexico and worked extremely long hours to be able to afford living in the school district. When GoGo was young, his family moved to the Conquest area for the educational opportunities. He commented, “I’m a freshmen at [Conquest] that comes to this school to get a better education. I prefer [Conquest] than going to different schools, ‘cause I feel like [Conquest’s] a better school to get a better education.”

GoGo struggled in his English, math, and science classes. He talked about Conquest being too difficult, saying, “I feel like they’re putting too much demands on us, they’re making

us for . . . For gradewise and all that. I feel like they're putting too much with all this." GoGo also felt classes at Conquest were not helpful and believed that students should only take courses related to their career interests. I asked, "What are your feelings about the types of subjects you are learning in school?" GoGo replied:

> I feel like, I feel like some of them are pretty useless 'cause I could probably be wrong about this, but if you're going off to work or college, you're learning one thing. I'm not sure if the skills of one particular class is gonna help with that. I feel like you should pick out classes that are like relatively close to what you want to do, and then just work with that instead of taking random classes just for the credits.

GoGo believed school was meant for students to prepare for the real world and job responsibilities. When asked to provide an example, GoGo talked about homework completion, saying, "Teachers show you that's out in the real world, 'cause sometimes they bring up if you don't turn in your homework then you could lose your job."

GoGo had a mix of disciplinary demerits for not having his school ID, insubordination, and fighting. When I asked him to describe his experiences with adults at Conquest, GoGo expressed that he felt targeted by some of the adults in the building. He shared:

> There's a couple that are pretty . . . That I feel like they try to get you in trouble.
>
> Roberto: Can you provide an example?
>
> GoGo: It was when one of the deans tried to ask me what happened. I was like, confused. I didn't know what I did. And then they try to force me to telling them something, but I didn't know what the answer was and I felt like I should have just been let go right there and not really . . . It was when, what's it called, when someone asked me to take off my hood, but then I did take that off but then right after, another dean saw me putting it back

> on, and then they asked me, why I took it on, but I didn't know, I didn't know why, I just felt like putting it back on. And then they forced an answer out of me but I felt like . . . frustrated.

GoGo talked about Conquest being a school that should offer more autonomy for students to engage at the level they want. I interpreted this to mean that GoGo wanted classes to be more fun and not be so regimented. GoGo felt that gym class could be a class that allows students to have more fun through physical games. He also shared high school should offer more academic support and be more than just teaching particular skills and meeting graduation credits. GoGo thought a good idea might be having Conquest develop students' confidence levels by helping them define personal goals and meet them throughout the year. He explained:

> I feel like they're putting too much demands on us and more tutoring for every class would help . . . I'd say more freedom, probably. Sometimes when, I'd say freedom, when you're with a topic in class, I'm trying to think of one. Yeah, probably more freedom in gym class, probably. 'Cause I feel like the classes are sometimes too long and when they make 'em a certain thing, the whole time it's . . .Yeah, actually [help students], to make goals, since freshman year to make a goal, make a couple goals, and throughout the whole year. Not just take classes and get credits.

Conclusion

The nine young men who participated in this research had both similar and dissimilar personal backgrounds and school experiences at Conquest. Excluding Pookie, most participants grew up in single-parent households. Each interview revealed childhood experiences with trauma and/or neglect. All students had academic and disciplinary struggles. Most participants, except for Isaac, had ideas to improve Conquest. Students expressed wanting more engaging classes and

fewer strict rules regarding tardy and dress code policies. Moreover, participants discussed wanting more career development and academic support. In the next chapter, I focus on the participants' experiences related to Conquest's rules and expectations, followed by the analysis chapter.

Chapter V: Experiences at Conquest

In the previous chapter, I summarized student backgrounds to provide a context for each participant's personal, home life, and school struggles. In this chapter, I present the participants' school experiences as they emerged through interviews, observations, school records, and school documents. What stood out from the data collected were conflicts between Conquest's rules and expectations and students' belief that their behaviors were justifiable. Student conduct rules that required Conquest students to respect adults at all times led to multiple encounters of participants being disciplined for insolence and insubordination. This in combination with Conquest's dominant cultural dress code rules of "good taste", white-collar postsecondary expectations, and experiences with implicit and explicit racism highly impacted participants' perceptions of Conquest and of themselves. Themes that emerged include (a) how students felt belittled, stereotyped/mislabeled, defeated, and rejected; (b) how students felt targeted and silenced; (c) how students felt neglected due to unmet socioemotional and occupational needs; and finally, (d) how students felt unwelcomed.

Belittled

Participants discussed experiences of feeling belittled in various ways. Pito and Denzel shared experiences of being labeled lazy and stupid while feeling defeated in the eyes of Conquest. Smalls and Tyson further perceived Conquest favored athletes and white students who were viewed as hardworking and smart.

Lazy and Stupid

Several participants shared how Conquest stereotyped them and made them feel lazy and stupid. They felt less confident about their ability to be successful because they could not meet Conquest's expectations of success compared to students who were praised and recognized as

being hardworking and intelligent. Pito shared, “We always got stereotypes about us [students of color] being stupid and stuff, but looking past all of that, I think we’re one of the hardest workers.” In his interview, Denzel explained, “I feel like if you basically participate in class, you seem smart, you seem like, you seem like you’re engaged, you’ll be treated right.” Pito and Denzel’s interview responses reveal how they felt about what Conquest saw in them and how they felt about themselves. Although they did not express any direct contempt toward Conquest, they felt they were unable to meet Conquest’s academic expectations.

Most research participants believed Conquest was a resourceful school for students to achieve futures filled with educational and economic success, but they did not feel it was a school for them. A few of the research participants felt stereotyped and/or mislabeled as lazy due to their personal circumstances. Students felt frustrated and helpless for repeatedly being disciplined for not meeting academic expectations. Denzel shared:

> I feel there are certain things about Conquest as a whole school that needs to be addressed for kids or someone like me, and I feel this school would be an amazing school if it helped more. Not like my teacher who felt I was just being lazy, just not giving my all, but later tried to help me when he remembered I got dysgraphia and stuff, and that’s . . . There’s worse disabilities, but it’s nothing crazy, but it has made me get dismissed by teachers and school.

Denzel felt he could apply himself but needed more help. He felt labeled by his teacher as lazy and believed he was not able to complete his work to the level of expectations because of his personal needs and circumstances.

Defeated

Students in this investigation explained they believed Conquest wanted them to fail because they did not understand the material being taught. Pito, who struggled with math and science, explained:

> Like in math, we don't need to know how to solve for X. At the end of the day, we don't need to know how to follow the equations and all that. I just feel like some of the stuff we do learn, but some of stuff, we don't really need . . . I feel like some of the stuff we really don't need to know. Like in science always too, we don't really need to know those equations in physics.

In addition to math and science, Pito felt other skill requirements (e.g., academic writing) were not needed in the future. He believed that students who do not meet what is expected get pushed "a grade behind." Pito explained:

> I feel like some of the stuff, like annotating, we don't, at the end of the day, we don't need to know what a simile is. We don't need to know how to find a metaphor. Like in the end result, what I want to become . . . When I'm in a firefighter, no one's going to tell me, "Oh, what's simile of this book in the thing?" So I just feel like, at the end of the day, some of the stuff they should take out of the curriculum . . . Overall I feel like since I am a grade behind, this should be my last year, because they failed me like the last week of school. So basically, I got screwed at the end of it.

Pito believed schools do not meet students where they are academically; instead, create a place for them to be punished. In addition to Pito, several students in this study felt Conquest punitively marginalized them with poor grades. He felt a sense of humiliation, confusion, helplessness, and anger by repeating required courses and taking the same classes with younger

peers. Validating this, Smalls spoke most clearly regarding his feelings about taking math and repeating it. Smalls shared:

> Well, last year, I took Algebra II, and I really didn't get it. And plus I had a lot of stuff going on at home. So I ended up having to redo it. I'm doing it again this year, but instead of this year, me redoing it again I feel like if I would of did pretty good last year, I wouldn't be taking Trig this year. Because me, specifically, I hate math.

Adding to participants feeling defeated was a buildup of frustration for continuously being written up for being late to class. Most participants, apart from GoGo, had multiple disciplinary demerits for being late. Smalls was especially frustrated with Conquest's tardy policy and felt it was an unfair system. He shared:

> The rules, they're all right. Tardy policy, that's one I would definitely change. Three tardies . . .I feel like being a minute or two late to class and being a minute or two late for three times, that does not all equivalate for a whole 5 hours on a Saturday. That's three times being a minute or two late. That's 6 minutes, maybe 9.

Smalls felt unfairly treated by Conquest. Over time, he lost interest in his own schooling for not upholding Conquest's high standards. As Smalls lost motivation for his education, he further disengaged from Conquest, leading toward an accumulation of multiple demerits for tardy violations and excessive absences. He failed several classes; specifically, he ended up failing Algebra II twice and was not going to graduate with his peers.

Favoritism

Smalls and Tyson discussed groups of students at Conquest being favored. To help understand Smalls and Tyson's point of view, I reviewed Conquest's curriculum guide and fall newsletter. Both documents highlighted students who were awarded academic achievements,

college acceptances, and scholarships. Within the first few pages of the 2019 curriculum guide and fall newsletter, Conquest students who met academic expectations were praised for their achievements and were featured as being named National AP Scholars and Conquest Scholars. These students were described by Conquest teachers as hard-working, going beyond expectations, intellectual, and talented.

In his interview, Smalls talked about students who performed well academically received all the positive attention. He believed that students who struggled at Conquest were provided little to no help or support. I asked him to describe how groups of students were treated by teachers and other staff members, and he replied:

> You got your typical, average "A" student that does all their work and does well on their tests and the teachers really show favoritism towards . . . They really favoritize that student. But, then you've got the one student barely getting by that asks for help and it seems like you're bugging them about doing their job instead of them just helping you.

Tyson also felt Conquest favored groups of students. When I asked him the same question I asked Smalls, he replied, "Athletes get favored a lot . . . and Caucasians."

To better understand Smalls and Tyson's comments regarding favoritism at Conquest, I reviewed school documents and found multiple areas of what reinforced their perceptions. Smalls' comment of the "average 'A' student that does all their work does well on their tests" and Tyson's perception of athletes and white students being favored became clearer when reviewing Conquest's curriculum guide and fall 2019 newsletter. Both documents highlighted students at Conquest who received academic awards. On page nine of the fall 2019 newsletter, Conquest featured the top ten students who graduated with the highest grade point averages and

posted teacher quotes and their photos next to their college destinations. Not one of the students recognized was a Black or Latino male student, which helped explain participants' perceptions.

Targeted and Silenced

Lopez, Tyson, and Big Bob perceived a few behavior expectations and rules as excessive. Specifically, school rules on respect, insolence, and insubordination led to conflict and disciplinary sanctions. Except for Isaac, all students had behavior intervention contracts and suspensions for violating student conduct rules.

Students perceived Conquest as punishing them for behaviors they did not see as issues. Lopez described feeling targeted and saw himself as a troublemaker, while Tyson and Big Bob felt disrespected by teachers. Overall, interview responses revealed frustrations with not having the opportunity to express themselves and feeling targeted.

Obey, Respect, or Be Disciplined

Research participants shared experiences that produced conflict with school personnel. Students' views of respect did not match Conquest's expectations. Due to past life trauma of being mistreated and neglected (discovered during my interviews), students felt targeted and silenced at Conquest. When I asked him to talk about his past and current school experiences, Lopez shared details on why he felt targeted:

> School? I've always been a troublemaker, because I have ADHD and, basically, I feel the more I try to get away from trouble, the more it comes for me. I currently have 73 demerits and I have not gotten written up in 3 weeks and it's just, I feel like I'm being targeted, they trying to get me in trouble and all that by the other teachers, because I just try to stay on my Ps and Qs and I just [feel], they're trying to get me.

Lopez was the most detailed regarding his feeling of being targeted. He had the highest number of demerits for insolence and insubordination. During his interview, Lopez expressed that he should be able to share his opinions at any time, and being respected by adults and peers was more important than obeying teachers.

Tyson and Big Bob were the most detailed when sharing their views about respect. Tyson and Big Bob helped me understand their definition of respect and disrespect. Tyson shared in his interview that he believed respect is not automatically given, it must be received first. He described:

> Respect is earned, it's not given . . . You can give respect. If you want respect, you have to give respect. So if you want me to respect you, you have to respect me too. You can't just be in my face yelling. That's gonna tend to make me not wanna respect you.

Tyson often felt frustrated during the school day and did not feel every adult earned his respect. During this past school year, Tyson did not get along with his 6th period teacher. He often felt frustrated in his classroom because he was not allowed to express himself. After several write-ups, Tyson became extremely frustrated and used profanity to express himself. Consequently, Tyson was dismissed from class and entered into a behavior intervention contract. Tyson's contract required him to meet with school administrators, his 6th period teacher, and parents before he could return to class. He was warned that another incident would lead to being dropped from the class and affect his ability to graduate from Conquest High School.

Like Tyson, Big Bob described an incident when he felt justified expressing his opinion to his teacher. Big Bob shared:

> There was this one time my teacher messed up my grade and I talked back to her . . . I feel like I don't have anger issues, but some people do say I do. It just depends if you disrespect me, I'm gonna disrespect you back.

Both Tyson and Big Bob felt Conquest's school rules on respect did not make sense to them. Within their parent-student handbook, Conquest required students to "respect the rights of others to maintain a quiet and safe environment," "respect teachers and staff," and "appreciate my teacher's effort and reciprocate with hard work and respect." If students did not obey these rules, they were issued disciplinary demerits of insolence and insubordination which led to detentions. Generally, participants felt disrespected by school personnel for not being allowed to express themselves.

Insolence and Insubordination

Each participant shared different experiences of not feeling part of Conquest High School's community. Even further, a few participants shared perceptions of being profiled. Specifically, GoGo and Smalls referenced in their interviews that Conquest targeted them, making them feel profiled. GoGo said, "I feel [the deans] are always trying to get you into trouble," and Smalls said, "I always got written up for having my headphones on my head. They were never on my ears, but they were on my head."

GoGo and Smalls were often disciplined for insolence (disrespect) and insubordination (disobedience) infractions regarding school IDs and headphones. GoGo was written up seven times in 5 months for not presenting his school ID. Smalls had several incidences that led to conflict between him and school personnel. He felt comfortable wearing his headphones on his head; however, due to a school rule of no headphones in the building, Smalls felt he was not breaking the rule because he did not cover his ears with his headphones. Two incidents that

really frustrated Smalls were times when he was written up for expressing his frustration and not complying with school personnel. On one occasion, Smalls was referred to the dean's office after making a negative comment toward his teacher because she did not help him with a math problem he did not understand. Smalls had to serve a 1-hour dean's detention and was required to apologize to his teacher. In the second incident, Smalls was issued a detention for insubordination for not removing his headphones.

Although GoGo and Smalls' experiences were used in the preceding examples, all research participants had patterns of resistance with school rules regarding Conquest's directives. Students in this study repeatedly defied Conquest because they did not agree with Conquest's model of expectations. They pushed back through their behavior and voice as a way to resist and empower themselves. Pito referred to a time when he disagreed with Conquest's rules of insolence and insubordination. He explained that a teacher falsely accused him of stealing from the cafeteria. After the dean investigated the situation, Pito was found innocent, but because he walked away from the teacher, he was directed to apologize for disobedience. I asked him to talk about a time he felt disrespected by Conquest, and he replied:

> I don't even know the teacher's name, but she thought that I stole a Vitamin Water or whatever. But, I don't even know why she would think that, because she said that I put it in my pocket, but clearly, she saw afterwards, it was in my hand. And then she tried to tell all the deans I stole it, and then she was trying to get me in trouble.
>
> Roberto: Can you talk about how you felt and acted, just so I could understand?
>
> Pito: Well, she came up to in front of me when I went, and then I was like, "No, I didn't," and I walked away. She said, "[Pito], come back here," and everything. I was like, "Ask the lady. I did not steal it." And the cafeteria lady said that, "No, he paid for it fully." And

> I also paid for my friend's meal on that day, too, in front of me, so she was just . . . And I just walked away, and that's why I didn't even . . . 'Cause those situations, you know, you keep on, you act crazy, it's just gonna get bad. So I just walked away.
>
> Roberto: How did you feel?
>
> Pito: Yeah, my dean wanted me to apologize to her, the way I acted afterwards, but I couldn't 'cause, you know, you can't just say how you feel, so I walked away.

Like Smalls, Pito illustrated, regardless of insolence and insubordination rules, they had to speak out because they needed to justify themselves.

Neglected

With the backdrop of what was learned through interviews, participants expressed feeling unsupported by their school. Their past experiences of trauma and neglect helped me better understand why they felt unsupported and neglected by Conquest.

Isaac, Pookie, GoGo, Pito, and Denzel shared traumatic experiences within their neighborhood and feelings of being neglected by family members, especially their fathers. Isaac shared experiences of being stabbed and having his car shot up by gang members. Pookie remembered his friends shot and killed when he was younger. GoGo shared a time when he and his family were robbed at gunpoint when selling his cellphone. Pito and Denzel discussed having fathers who were unfit, neglectful, and never helped them prepare for life.

Students felt Conquest placed school expectations and policies over the needs of students. This perception led to an accumulation of distrust and animosity against their school and other students. Tyson explained:

> It's like you're stuck cause there's nothing the school can do, but at the same time you feel like you're being let down or disappointed because you put all your trust in the

> school, and the school's hands are tied, and they can't do nothing. The school says, they're here to help you. And when you really need someone to help you, it's like they can't really do nothing about it except implement their policies which prevents them from helping in a way that school supposed to help you, but at the same time isn't.

Although Conquest expects students to follow rules, research participants felt unsupported by Conquest. Overall, participants felt let down and disappointed with Conquest for not meeting their personal expectations and needs.

Unmet Socioemotional Needs

In various ways, students in this investigation felt that Conquest, like their parents, did not meet their needs. They felt Conquest was more interested in students who met their prescribed expectations. Quoted earlier, Smalls felt Conquest favored students who received A's and completed all their academic work, but the school did not help students "barely getting by," even after they reached out for support. Similarly, Lopez felt Conquest made some efforts through teachers to help students, "but then when you really need their help, they can't really help you."

Research participants felt Conquest did not understand their needs and only valued the success of students. Pito's father was out of his life, and he had to learn at a young age to rely on and take care of himself. He was one of the students in this study who specifically expressed teachers at Conquest were good overall, but they only focused on meeting school expectations and not the well-being of students. Pito felt he was never provided what he specifically needed on a personal and academic level. Outside of feeling Conquest was not teaching what was useful, Pito shared he was often tired at school because he worked a lot of hours at his job to help his family. I asked him to describe a typical day in high school, and he replied:

> I feel like some of the stuff we really don't need to know. Like in science, we don't really need to know those equations in physics . . . So, I just get up and go to school . . . I normally barely ever get sleep at night. Sometimes it's hard for me to sleep, but then I come anyways. I don't really eat anything, at lunch or breakfast. My first meal is right after school, and then I have to get ready for work . . . Normally, I try to do my homework at school. So during gym periods, as soon as I get there, trying to finish it before class or something. For me, I just want to get to work right after school.
>
> Roberto: Can you talk about not sleeping and your eating pattern. Do you know why that is, why you don't get a lot of sleep? Ever thought about it?
>
> Pito: Well, sometimes it's my bed, just 'cause it's really uncomfortable. And my eating, I don't know, I used to a lot, a lot, but then I just kinda just stopped, and I don't know. . . . So growing up in my house you kind of got used to . . . you gotta make your own meal and things.

Although Pito did not specifically say Conquest did not meet his needs, he felt he had to focus on helping himself. Similar to his home environment, Pito was learning that adult and authority figures do not focus on helping or caring for you. He was learning not to trust others and focus on surviving independently. Like his relationship with his father, Pito felt detached from his school. Learning and academic expectations seemed pointless in Pito's eyes because they did not help with financial, job, and overall life responsibilities.

Whereas Pito seemed detached from Conquest, Denzel discussed his discontent. Denzel shared how he felt unsupported by Conquest, which contributed to his feeling of distrust. In his interview, I asked him to talk about his past and current school experiences at Conquest. Denzel told of a story when a teacher did not meet his needs but worked to reconcile. He shared:

> Basically, throughout school, I never really liked school, ‘cause I felt like I wasn't good enough to be in school ‘cause I have learning disabilities, but it's not nothing serious, and I kinda got over those to an extent. . . . The teachers who had my back, they were supportive, but there were many who . . . sometimes they'll take advantage of me and stuff, which is just like . . . They'll wonder how to help me out, whatever, deciding with what's going on at home, and I know that the person I'm mad at, he basically never even liked that I had a disability, even though he . . . he says nowadays . . . He didn't even acknowledge it, and I didn't either, because I feel like okay, I don't even got nothing wrong with me. But then he brought it up again, trying to . . . he trying to be cool with me now and it's all okay. So we going through this again, and it kind of confusing to me, his opinions on stuff, pretty much. ‘Cause he felt I was just being lazy, just not giving my all. Then I get older and stuff, I'm like, "Okay, maybe you're right." Now he's trying to be more solid towards me and get my love and trust back which I'm not doing.

Both Pito and Denzel provided glimpses into their individual struggles of developing trusting relationships due to their personal circumstances. Their school perceptions were built upon their personal unmet needs of developing security and trust in others. Although it may not be the responsibility of Conquest to provide security and build trust among students, participants like Denzel saw school as a place to receive love and trust.

Similar to Pito and Denzel, Isaac expressed discontent toward his father and described his dad as "not a good one, [because] he drinks a lot." Pito, Denzel, and Isaac exhibited the need of developing security and trust with others because it was not fully provided at home. Pookie's interview helped me learn that he had a need to feel physically and emotionally supported. When he was young, his grades dropped after losing friends to shootings. Pookie struggled with

handling his emotions, but shared that Conquest was “definitely a good school” because “people were nice and cool” different from his previous schools. Although this was how Pookie felt about Conquest, his disciplinary record seemed to tell another story. Pookie had multiple disciplinary infractions for causing school disruptions through fighting and using profanity.

GoGo also struggled with developing trust with school personnel at Conquest. His struggle was mainly tied to his childhood when he lost contact with his father after his parents divorced. GoGo had the most write ups for not complying with Conquest’s school ID rule requiring students to carry their school ID at all times. He seemed frustrated with Conquest’s rules, which contributed to his fighting and insubordination rule breaking.

Student interviews highlighted a lack of institutional support needed by research participants. Although Conquest did not reference a formal socioemotional curriculum or intervention program within their curriculum guide, Conquest had nine counselors and three social workers who provided socioemotional support for students. For unknown reasons, participants did not reference or reach out to their counselor or social worker.

Occupational Growth

Alongside a lack of socioemotional support, participants discussed feeling a lack of support for their occupational growth. Except for Pookie and GoGo, most students shared feeling their career interests did not align with Conquest’s expectations. Throughout different segments of interviews, students revealed frustrations and ideas that would help them meet their future goals.

Tyson was one student who was able to clearly explain that every student did not want what Conquest expected of students. Tyson felt there was more to life than just gaining material and social success. In his interview, Tyson shared:

> I mean everybody wanna be a millionaire, everybody wanna have money in their pocket. That's really what everybody grew up with like money is everything, but letting that control you leads you to being lost in who you are. It can lead you to a place that some people don't wanna go so you got to be able to wanting to know what it is you want in life. It can't just be for greed or something that could just tear you away. You gotta know what's important to you and know how to get it.

Tyson's explanation provided insight into what other students wanted out of life after Conquest. The students in this study did not align with Conquest's promotion of becoming an academic achiever who strived to become a material and social success. Walking through Conquest, I observed numerous alumni posters entitled "Conquer the World." Each poster highlighted Conquest alumni who attended Ivy League colleges, were in executive-level positions in business, or won prestigious awards in acting and government. The students in this investigation wanted something different. They wanted a future focused on finding ways to connect and pursue their personal talents and interests.

To begin understanding what the students in this study desired, I asked students what their dreams were and what they wanted to pursue after graduating. What emerged was a divide between Conquest's curricular and extracurricular offerings and participants' career interests. Pito talked about wanting to become a firefighter but felt Conquest's classes would not prepare him. He shared:

> I just feel like some of the stuff doesn't really help in the long run. I just feel like some of the stuff we don't really need to know . . . 'cause what I'm trying to become, I'm not really gonna need to know what X equals all the time. I'm not gonna wanna know for all that stuff. I like math, but I'm trying to become a fireman.

Denzel wanted to become a boxer, and although he saw Conquest as a "good school" and gave credit to teachers for trying to help him, he shared in his interview that Conquest was not a school for kids like him. I asked him what his dreams were, and he replied:

> I kind of want to . . . Do something like help out . . . I know that I can't just give vibes . . . I can't add to my pockets to people if I am not straight. What I will say is that if I can follow my main dream and stuff I will be successful at that.
>
> Roberto: Okay. Can you talk about that?
>
> Denzel: Yeah. I kind of want to be a fighter like a boxer or something but I had no real training yet. But I had a friend, he was in MMA.
>
> Roberto: Okay. And then with that, how long have you wanted to be a fighter?
>
> Denzel: When I realized all this, the emotions I've got inside of me, they are kind of strong and I can put that something positive stuff so I want to be a fighter.

Big Bob wanted to become an electrician and landscaper, but felt no school support. In the following conversation, he shared:

> Roberto: What are your dreams?
>
> Big Bob: I don't really know. I wanna . . . At first, I kinda wanna work with my family with their landscaping business. And then, I don't know, I was thinking about going to school to be an electrician. That's, yeah, that's basically it.
>
> Roberto: Do you see school helping with your dreams?
>
> Big Bob: Not so much, not really.
>
> Roberto: Can you explain?

> Big Bob: I feel like they don’t really teach you about what you want. They don’t teach you about how becoming what you want or learning about money, or even how to cooperate [connect you] with people in your job interests.

Similar to Big Bob, Lopez shared during his interview that he wanted to become a chef but lacked support. He blamed Conquest for not allowing him to experience advanced culinary classes due to his academic struggles, indicating:

> [Conquest] is not so lenient on what you want. Because, let’s say, over three years, I’ve only had one elective, and that was Woods and Metals. I would have definitely liked to take Culinary in either my first or second year. So then that way, I could have got in Advanced Culinary, and probably gotten a head start on my chef career.

During Smalls’ interview, he talked about wanting to work in aviation and possibly enter the military, but he expressed that Conquest lacked programming that would help him. I asked him what his dreams were, and he replied:

> First, I wanted to be a pediatrician, but now I’m looking more towards an air traffic controller.
>
> Roberto: How can you achieve and reach your dreams?
>
> Smalls: Lately, I’ve been taking the military approach. So . . .
>
> Roberto: How do you see school helping, or not helping reach those dreams?
>
> Smalls: Well, school, there’s no kind of air traffic controller classes or . . . I know some high schools even have ROTC. I think BHS [a neighboring high school] has it too. So there’s just certain programs and stuff that other high schools have that we don’t offer.

Like Smalls, Isaac had aspirations of entering a blue-collar career while incorporating his interest with the military. Isaac shared, "My dream is to either become a mechanic or become one of the Navy SEALs."

Unwelcomed

Expressed throughout interviews, participants felt generally unwelcomed by school personnel. A few of the participants saw Conquest as a good and resourceful school but not a school for them. Students felt different levels of racial tensions and did not identify with their classmates or behavior and dress code expectations. I sensed students felt frustration and anger due to feeling challenged, disempowered, and voiceless.

Referenced earlier within the favoritism section, Conquest had no Black or Latino student visually praised among their fall 2019 newsletter, which explained Tyson's view that Conquest favored white students. Although Denzel did not explicitly say that Conquest favored white students, he felt that regardless of the school a Black student attends, there will always be racial struggles. He confided:

> As a black man, it's gonna be hard no matter what I do. I would try and go back to the city and stuff. . . . But I realized that if I go to an all-white school, it was gonna be hard. All-black school, it's gonna be hard. So no matter what I do, it's gonna be hard.

Denzel did not expand on how he felt; however, his interview responses focused on clothing style, physical appearance, facial expressions, and skin tone. It was difficult for me to hear Denzel's view, but he helped me understand on a deeper level that he felt schools favored white students regardless of the primary racial demographic of the school being Black.

Denzel further explained that Conquest was not a school for all Black students. More specifically, he felt that Conquest was not a school for urban Black students with hardships. He described:

> I will say that a lot of kids at Conquest, I said some are really kind of sheltered, not necessarily got that much adversity. . . . I'm just saying Conquest would be a real decent school if there were more city kids. . . . If I didn't dress the way that I do, if I didn't talk the way that I did, if I didn't look the way I did as a Black person, there wouldn't be a problem. A lot of times I feel like if you dressed white, you won't have no problems.

Tyson and Denzel provided insight into how they viewed Conquest. Denzel's interview was the most direct in how he saw Conquest; however, each participant in their own way provided a deeper look into Conquest's white structure built upon "good taste" rules and unwritten social expectations, along with an explicit act of racism that contributed to an overall feeling of being unwelcomed.

Good Taste at Conquest

Several participants did not agree with Conquest's dress code rules. They felt they should be able to wear sports shirts, ripped jeans, durags/do-rags, and not be disciplined or profiled based on their clothing preference. Denzel remembered a time when conflict arose because a teacher approached him regarding a sports shirt he wore. I asked him to describe his relationships with teachers and other staff members, counselors, deans, security, coaches, and the principal, and he replied:

> I feel like me as a whole I kind of dismiss connections with teachers and staff, but I will say I had a couple altercations with teachers and deans because of just my temper. Also,

> the fact that I feel often provoked, so I kinda over exaggerate something, and I feel like it could have been different but I also feel I have a temper.
>
> Roberto: Can you, if you don't mind, talk about your temper? Can you remember an example, so that I can understand?
>
> Denzel: It was during junior year, and inside the gym class the doors to get inside the locker were locked. I had on this shirt, actually, it had a bull on it. He thought this meant like a gang something.
>
> Roberto: What happened and how did you feel?
>
> Denzel: He was judging because my shirt because he was asking my schedule and stuff, and I got really mad by it, and I started . . . I cussed him out and all of that. We got into it and stuff, and he wrote me up I went for a meeting and stuff and then we talked about it and I apologized, and it was all good. But it was like . . . I feel like, I was not being heard. He was making an assumption about me as a whole. His body language on his face said "I'm making an assumption about you." So I was pissed.

Denzel felt the teacher misjudged his shirt as being affiliated with a gang. Underlying this experience was a feeling that Black students were being profiled as gang members based on clothing preference. Denzel explained the situation became unexplainably escalated. He felt attacked, became angered, and responded with profanity.

Smalls was less bitter about Conquest's dress code. Whereas Denzel was outright angered by being judged by his clothing, Smalls was more passive aggressive. Smalls did not go into details about clothing preferences he had or Conquest's dress code rules, but he was disciplined on multiple occasions for dress code violations. During his interview, Smalls came across as losing interest in his schooling. As his interview went on, he became apathetic and did

not show any concern for his struggles at Conquest. He did not express any frustration or anger, but not long before our conversation, Smalls received a 5-hour Saturday detention for violating the school's dress code by wearing pants with holes in inappropriate places. Smalls seemed to have become numb to receiving demerits and detentions.

Unlike Smalls, Tyson seemed to have a growing frustration with Conquest's dress code. He felt Conquest expected students not to only act but also dress in specific ways. Tyson explained in his interview that sagging pants and durags/do-rags were some of the biggest issues that Conquest had with students of color. Tyson shared:

> [Conquest] misjudges students by not getting to know them and only focuses on what they wear and not their character. Sagging their pants and what you wear can cause the biggest problems. Some clothing material can be like you say, "You can't wear it or you have to cover it up." When students wanna wear a jersey, or a student wears . . . Has on a do-rag, or has a hood on his head, or basically, you can see their face, you can see their whole face. Well, I understand the hood part, but with a do-rag, I just don't understand that part. You can still see their whole face with the do-rag. And I guess . . . I was talking about it with security, and he was like, "It's was just for the safety of the school." 'Cause with the cameras and how they're angled, you can't really see, so I guess for me it doesn't make sense.

Tyson's interview made clear that clothing rules and expectations did not always make sense to him. He found a contradiction to the rule of not wearing durags/do-rags, which is a common head covering for "Black men and people of color, that protects, moisturizes, maintains hairstyles and holds cultural meaning" (Klafeta, 2021, p. 1) and is often banned by U.S. public schools. Tyson explained that he understood the safety rule for students not to wear hoodies

because they hide a student's face, but he did not understand why durags/do-rags were not allowed: A student's face is visible. Although "good taste" is not a clear white cultural expectation at Conquest, it emerges through dress code restrictions which have been linked to the clothing preference of students of color based on interviews and past research. While good taste expectations may seem culturally neutral, they set students of color up to be challenged, controlled, and triggered by the authority of a majority white faculty and staff.

Unwritten Social Expectations of American Patriotism

Participants did not refer to any issues regarding American patriotism; however, during hallway observations I noted several incidences of white school personnel sharing with me and with students their frustration when students did not respect the Pledge of Allegiance. More specifically, it stood out that Black students were periodically approached for not remaining silent during the Pledge. What stood out more was that many students were wearing Black Lives Matter (BLM) and former National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick t-shirts. BLM began in 2013 with protests against police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people, and Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem during the start of NFL games in 2016 in protest of police brutality and racial inequality (Campbell, 2021).

On three separate occasions, white school personnel approached male students of color and asked them to take off their hat and have a little respect during the Pledge of Allegiance. During these observations, students would take off their hats and walk away, seemingly irritated with the incident. In two of these three points of conflict, school personnel followed the young men to further address the topic.

Although students in this research did not discuss the Pledge of Allegiance, it emerged as another critical point of young men of color not feeling welcomed at Conquest. There were no

rules or expectations when reviewing Conquest's parent-student handbook or other school documents regarding reciting or standing for the Pledge of Allegiance. However, through my field observations, it became apparent that white school personnel felt disrespected when students did not acknowledge the Pledge of Allegiance.

Because the Pledge of Allegiance at Conquest did not have an explicit rule or behavior expectation tied to it, I could not understood why white school personnel took it upon themselves to address students staying silent or not reciting the Pledge. One possible reason I observed conflict with the Pledge may be unwritten social expectations stemming from institutional racism and/or differences in political orientations.

Blackface at Conquest

During my interviews, an explicit act of racism through "blackface" came up. While talking about issues Lopez had with Conquest High School, he shared about a recent blackface incident which occurred within the previous semester in 2019. I asked Lopez if there was anything he would like to change at Conquest and if he saw any overall problems. He replied:

> Problems? With school? Oh. More like, honestly, with the time being, honestly, just racism.
>
> Roberto: Okay. Can you talk about that? Do you feel this school is racist?
>
> Lopez: The other day, there was this incident where a couple of white students painted their face black, and referenced it a black face that happened during the racism times, how they didn't wanna let the black actors get on there, on the show. So they got White actors and painted their faces black. And these White students, they drove around at a McDonald's harassing African American people. And so basically, all that blew up. There was a walkout, there was marches. They was doing . . . There was a lot of things.

Lopez was the only student who referred to the blackface event. He was also one of the only students who directly referred to Conquest as a racist school based on his perception. Although the other eight research participants did not label Conquest as a racist school, it emerged through perceptions that white students were treated better based on meeting dress code and Conquest's overall expectations.

Conclusion

The young men in this study were living with personal, home life, and school struggles, while balancing their identities and perceptions of themselves and others. Their backgrounds and the ways they lived out their lives seemed unknown by Conquest, especially by white faculty and staff. Although their experiences at Conquest were mostly negative, a couple of participants had positive perceptions of the school. Overall, however, participants felt Conquest was not a school for them. Isaac and Pookie were the clearest expressing that the neighborhood and the school were much nicer and safer compared to their past schools. Based on interview responses, students felt disappointed in themselves for not meeting Conquest's expectations. They measured themselves against what Conquest promoted. Linked to Smalls, Tyson, and Denzel's comments, Conquest favored white students. Overall, participants did not seem angry at Conquest, but rather discouraged for not being white resourced students that they saw Conquest favoring.

Chapter VI: Analysis

In the previous chapters, I described the lives, experiences, and perceptions of nine low-income Black and Latino students. Interview data presented in the last chapter provided a closer look into how they felt about their school experiences at Conquest High School. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of their experiences and perceptions that contributed to their school engagement. I begin by unpacking the American nightmare expressed by participants, followed by my lens of the American Dream ideology anchored within critical theories of marginalization, reproduction, and resistance.

An American Nightmare

What is the American nightmare? In contrast to the American Dream, Malcolm X (1964) described the American nightmare as an experience Black individuals faced through an American victimization system. His speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," delivered in 1964, expressed his frustration with Americanism, which he described as disguised hypocrisy. Malcolm X saw the American system as victimizing Black people under ideals of patriotism and democracy but at the expense of the Black and poor population. Malcolm X further explained that during the 1950's and 60's he saw many Black citizens experiencing poverty and criminalization, but all the while saw white people experiencing political and economic prosperity. The America Malcolm X saw lied to Black people through a political system filled with empty promises delivered during elections. During this time, Malcolm X explained a majority of the senatorial and congressional system was still run by southern segregation. Because of this, he explained there was never a battle won between the North and South during the Civil War. Malcolm X described everything south of Canada should be considered the racist south.

Although many students grow up and are conditioned into believing the myth of the American Dream of becoming a material and social success through hard work and effort, the low-income young men of color in this study encountered the American nightmare narrative. Similar to the statistics and stories of other low-income men of color in the literature (Aud et al., 2010; Bock et al., 1998; Lewis et al., 2010; Noguera, 1997; Skiba, 2002; Strayhorn, 2010), the young men in this study were developing a belief in an American nightmare through their experiences of school punishment, institutional racism, and overt racism. These students were looking for a caring and supportive school experience but encountered punitive interactions and a lack of support. They were not developing optimistic visions of future successes but rather uncertainties on where they would end up after high school.

When first hearing their school experiences and reviewing their school records, they appeared to be students who were defiant and did not care about their education. They regularly got into trouble and received low grades, representing the opposite of a model student. All students had multiple failures and demerits for running late to class. Several of the participants also had repeated offenses for use of profanity, along with insubordination and insolence for not complying with school authorities. Even further, Smalls, Tyson, Big Bob, Pookie, and GoGo were nearly expelled for egregious behavior disruptions and fighting with other students. Yet, looking deeper, these students faced school punishment and negative judgment formed under middle/upper-class white expectations. These students carried the burden of disappointment, home-life struggles, and negative racial stereotypes. These pressures were demoralizing, making it difficult to navigate schooling expectations. The young men in this study found themselves operating with limited resources within a discouraging and oppressive structure of their public education.

Reexamining interviews and school records, I discovered a different narrative. These young men were not failures or troublemakers. Their interviews revealed broken relationships that led to distrust in others. Participants were young men finding their place and identity within their school community. They displayed courage and resilience through continuing to return to school knowing they may not be welcomed. They wanted emotional support through acceptance, affirmation, and validation just as their peers received. They did not see themselves as the model white students Smalls and Tyson described, students who were favored and praised for academically achieving and succeeding. Rather, they saw themselves in a negative light through the lens of their schooling experiences. Lopez described himself as a troublemaker and Denzel felt that regardless of what school he attended he would always have problems because of being Black. Year after year, these students encountered disciplinary demerits for expressing themselves and received failing grades due to a lack of resources and support. Each year, they dove deeper into another layer of frustration but were finding ways to move forward. Although some students with similar circumstances may have been expelled or dropped out of school, these young men kept returning to school, repeated failed classes, and accepted their demerits and detentions.

By participant accounts, Conquest was unaware of students' socioeconomic and socioemotional struggles. Interviews and school records helped me understand these young men of color had difficulty balancing school expectations and their own experiences. They learned at early ages to distrust individuals, and this carried over into their school behaviors and interactions with both school personnel, other students and the system at large.

What supports did these young men need to perform better in school? First, it is important to realize and understand that based on interview responses they had early childhood

experiences of neglect and trauma; they lacked family support and resources, and they lacked positive relational experiences. Although Conquest may not be able to fill in all the missing emotional and developmental aspects of these students' lives, they can explore adding supportive programs that center on equity for all students and help these young men develop a positive personal and racial identity.

It is unclear what the future holds for these young men after high school. As I learned from their interviews, their occupational dreams were not supported. As Smalls shared, Conquest did not offer an ROTC program to help him transition to the military like other neighboring schools offered. Lopez did not get the opportunity to take advanced culinary classes due to his academic failures. Big Bob expressed that Conquest did not teach students practical skills for how to work with personal finances, and Pito felt Conquest did not prepare students for their specific career interests. In Pito's case, he felt Conquest spent a lot of time teaching academic skills in English, math, and science, but he did not gain any direct skills for preparing him to become a firefighter.

These young men were learning to support themselves solely by navigating their postsecondary goals on their own. Interviews further helped me understand their feelings of frustration came from specific school expectations and experiences. Even though they did not trust or fully connect with teachers and school personnel, they knew they had to stay in school to pursue their livelihood and career interests. Their choices were binary. Not completing their high school education would close doors on many opportunities for them to live out their future dreams. Receiving their diploma would contribute to breaking away from negative stereotypes associated with low-income Black and Latino students.

School professionals dedicated to supporting low-income young men of color need to understand and be aware of the systemic processes that negatively impact their lives, potentially forming an American nightmare filled with hopelessness and despair. This begins by first understanding the myth of the American Dream and unpacking reproductive systems that add another layer of marginalization while positioning low-income young men of color into oppressive schooling experiences and behaviors of resistance.

The American Dream Ideology

Research has identified the American Dream as an ideology built upon a U.S. equal opportunity belief that individuals can become a material and social success through hard work and effort (Hargreaves, 1967; Hochschild, 1995; MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 1997). As researchers have pointed out, marginalized groups often face barriers connecting to the American Dream narrative. Schools have demonstrated being nonneutral and inequitable spaces where students of color often face further marginalizing practices (Annamma et al., 2013; Brantlinger, 2006; Raby, 2012). Schools use the American Dream ideology with good intentions for their students to succeed but rather negatively indoctrinate youth with ideals that benefit privileged groups and the labor market (Apple, 1995; Au, 2009; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brantlinger, 2004b; Edsall, 2012; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). The American Dream ideology provided this investigation a lens through which to identify and critique power structures that impacted research participants.

The American Dream has become an embedded ideal infused within multiple aspects of schooling expectations. In the context of this study, the American Dream was revealed through school expectations within Conquest High School's mission statement, school publications, and promotional hallway postings. Most notably, "Conquer the World" posters filled the hallways. The posters praised alumni in white-collar fields of business, education, government, and

entertainment, while reinforcing the expectation for students to become a material and social success.

Written within their school's mission, Conquest's intent was focused on "improving the lives of students" under their high standards of academics and personal development. Conquest saw students through a deficit model. Students were seen as individuals without preexisting identities needing to improve as opposed to being seen as individuals with existing strengths and unique social and cultural identities. Observed within the school's course catalog and fall newsletter, Conquest's goal was to change students to meet their ideal of excellence by working hard to earn "superior" A grades, achieve success through academic recognition, and graduate to become material and social successes similar to their alumnae promoted through their posters.

Observed through the hallways and seen throughout the school documents reviewed, Conquest repeatedly highlighted the importance of students excelling, achieving, and respecting authority figures. Students were being expected to become an altered version of themselves but simultaneously given empty rhetoric about being valued and recognized for their diverse backgrounds. While several students believed Conquest was a good school they ultimately encountered a different narrative than what was being promoted. They made clear Conquest was not a school for them.

When considering the American Dream narrative, it is important to keep in mind that youth are highly impressionable and sit within some of the most vulnerable spaces in society. They have no positional authority and fall under the power systems that have been established and designed by historically oppressive structures. Despite the American Dream narrative some groups encounter, often messages pertaining to white middle and upper-class students, many low-income young men of color encounter an American nightmare. Through oppressive systemic

structures, low-income students of color experience a different reality. Stereotypes that emerged through interviews revealed negative school experiences and perceptions. These students helped me understand they did not feel they were achieving Conquest's ideal of excellence as it mirrored the American Dream. They seemed to be in a worse position attending school than when they first began.

The students in this study had long-experienced broken school relationships and lacked school resources. However, they had some level of self-confidence because they learned to deal and survive within their life circumstances by staying in school and voicing their opinions on improving their circumstances. Based on their willingness to be interviewed and having personal goals these students had a sense of pride in themselves despite their experiences with absent fathers, financial struggles, and experiences with trauma and neglect. As our interviews carried on, students revealed the growing negative self-image they were developing. They began viewing themselves through the lens of Conquest's American Dream and white middle/upper class expectations. Through Conquest's nonsupportive and punitive system, these young men were learning to resist the narrative that was expected of them instead of transforming their circumstances. Their resistance was further marginalizing them through their failing grades and disciplinary sanctions leading toward closing out opportunities that they were seeking. They were concurrently learning their racial identity was a weakness rather than a strength.

From Conquest's perspective, these students were seen as at risk and a problem. Students' negative interactions, recalled during interviews, shows how Conquest felt these students were unmotivated and needed punitive discipline to be molded and changed into a model student aligned to the American Dream. However, according to students, in this study, they did not necessarily desire to achieve Conquest's ideals. They felt shortchanged and did not

receive any support or resources to assist them with their needs and goals. They did not change their behavior or academic performance after receiving numerous disciplinary consequences. School records and hallway observations further demonstrated negative school experiences these young men were surrounded by. These students of color were disciplined more and praised less when compared to their white and resourced peers. Rather than Conquest staying true to their mission aligned to the professed American Dream, Conquest treated these students with diverse backgrounds punitively. Students met additional, oppressive obstacles in school that they had already witnessed and experienced in their personal and home lives. A new starting point is needed if Conquest desires to stay true to its mission. If students have a fundamental worth and recognize their diverse backgrounds are true, Conquest can begin reshaping, refining, and dismantling their school rules and policies that reproduce oppressive and marginalizing obstacles.

Marginalization

Marginalization takes an opposing view to the at-risk and deficit-thinking model (Valencia, 1997) found within Conquest's punitive school practices and policies. Whereas the at-risk model holds low-income students of color accountable for their behaviors, marginalization views the complex social, political, gendered, racial, and economic factors that surround them as accountable (Gonzalez, 2001; Kearns, 2011; James & Taylor, 2008; Thomson, 2002).

Each student in this study was not at risk but was instead marginalized. Participants came from low-income backgrounds and experienced trauma, neglect, systemic racism through Conquest's dress codes policies, and interpersonal racism through negative experiences with faculty, staff, and students. Several participants came from single-parent households, and some were working large numbers of hours to provide financial support to their family. Pito reported

working 20 hours a week and one of the participants disclosed selling drugs to help their mother with financial responsibilities. In addition to working through family financial struggles, students were working through unresolved socioemotional struggles associated with trauma and neglect. Big Bob, Pito, Isaac, and Smalls talked about trust and anger issues with their fathers. Tyson, Isaac, and Pookie shared early life experiences with gun violence and the loss of friends through shootings.

Students also shared racially driven stereotypes, along with the way they physically looked, dressed, and talked contributed to the ways they were negatively treated in school. Pito, Tyson, and Denzel described it best by saying that if they were not Black and students of color, they would not have experienced the unsettling school interactions they encountered. If these students were middle or upper-class white students, I questioned if they would have the same unsupported struggles at home and conflicts in school. Through no choice of their own, these young men were marginalized due to their socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. They experienced struggles that were unrelated to who they were on an individual level.

What can Conquest and other schools do to serve these students and marginalized populations in general? Conquest can begin by understanding these young men entered their school already in marginalized positions in life. Conquest can begin dismantling their at-risk model which blames low-income students for their lack of resources through punitive consequences. Conquest can begin changing their policies and practices centered within the understanding that societal oppression contributed to these students' academic and behavioral struggles.

Due to their socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, these students were experiencing obstacles different from many white middle/upper class suburban students. Participants shared

they had financial struggles compounded with either broken relationships with their fathers or came from single-parent households being raised by their mother or a family relative. Each interview helped me understand at a deeper level the personal and family struggles these students endured. Smalls had no contact with his father and was living with his aunt while having personal struggles with his mother. Tyson had unexplainable anger he could not identify and was helping his mother with several medical struggles. Isaac had a lot of anger toward his father and survived both a stabbing and car shooting while finding ways to financially help his mother. Big Bob, Lopez, and GoGo struggled finding ways to navigate language barriers because their families did not speak English fluently.

Based on perceptions of students in this investigation, Conquest treated them in negative ways through punitive approaches because of the way they looked, dressed, and talked. Students struggled in many of their classes and did not share any areas where they were able to build confidence in their abilities. They had low and failing grades that impacted their view of themselves and their school. Interviews revealed students struggled academically due to learning differences; they had trouble grasping the material being taught. These students came from low-income backgrounds with few resources to help them meet schooling expectations. Although they received little to no support with their academics and punitive disciplinary demerits for not meeting Conquest's expectations, it may be more prudent to have offered these students positive attention and added resources as opposed to deepening their marginalized societal positions.

The punitive approach taken by Conquest involved placing the blame of student failures and delinquency on them by not offering them more supportive and educational interventions. Reflected in school records and shared within interviews, students felt penalized for being

themselves. In their eyes, they did not see any wrongdoing with their behavior and felt Conquest could have done a better job helping them with their academics.

For different subgroups of low-income students of color, school failure and delinquency have become commonplace. Their school experiences taught them that their poor academic performance and misbehavior represented who they were rather than responses to their life experiences. These experiences were connected to social, political, and economic factors that impacted their neighborhoods and families. Students like Denzel and Lopez, who expressed feeling devalued due to their low resources and racial identity, felt labeled as lazy and stupid. They internalized their negative experiences at Conquest, leading to further adverse confrontations and consequences.

What can Conquest and similar schools do to help shift from an at-risk (blaming marginalized students) paradigm to a marginalized (recognizing external factors) paradigm? This shift begins with the understanding that school policies and practices can reproduce but also dismantle and transform oppressive barriers that perpetuate societal marginalization by blaming the victim. Schools must become conscious that their policies and practices have the power to influence and reproduce positive or negative student performance and behavior of low-income students of color.

Reproduction and Resistance

This study queried what the futures of the participating young men of color held. Their school experiences at Conquest were the best indicators to answering this question. Participants were developing negative perceptions of others and themselves. It is important to remember that although teenagers may appear adultlike due to their physical appearance, they are children developing their identity in preparation for adulthood. While youth learn from both positive and

negative experiences, using punitive school practices rather than equitable and restorative practices may further reproduce the marginalization of low-income students of color (Lam, 1995; Payne & Welch, 2015).

The young men in this investigation were examples of social reproduction theorists' argument of the education system reproducing social and class inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 2009; Willis, 1977). Their low-income circumstances left them with few resources and limited opportunities to succeed at the level they desired to reach. These young men had difficulty succeeding academically and were not provided resources to support their future interests. Conquest HS had schooling practices that promoted college and white-collar pathways, but left out 2-year programs, trade schools, and military tracks that would have been helpful for all participants. Seen through my observations, Conquest had university pennants throughout the hallways, classrooms, and offices; however, I did not see any posters for trade schools or military programs. Through either governmental influences or Conquest's established culture, the school pressured students into career pursuits corresponding to unequal labor-market relations connected to a capitalistic economy. Seen within the fall 2019 newsletter and school hallways, Conquest celebrated white students who achieved academically and alumni who entered white-collar fields.

The public celebration of successful alumni impacted students in this study who were not able to do well in school or connect with their individual career interests. These students were compelled to resist Conquest's attempt to impose their dominant cultural capital and ideals. Students regularly defied school rules even after receiving punitive consequences of demerits, detentions, and suspensions. They resisted Conquest's expectations in various ways. Ultimately, these students' resistance contributed to reproducing school failure and their class inequalities.

Even though Conquest promoted a positive educational experience, these students encountered a different phenomenon. Their school experiences directed them to develop a negative narrative of their future pursuits. Although Conquest was aware of their limited resources and, to some extent, their trauma and neglect, these students were at the early stages of experiencing a reproduction of their social class inequities. They had fewer resources compared to their middle and upper-class peers. Due to their academic and school behavior failures, these young men would exit high school with the same social inequities with which they entered. Through my years of experience as an educator and what I learned through related research in this study, students similar to the research participants who had numerous negative school experiences end up with little access to opportunities because of joblessness, unsatisfactory life circumstances, and/or criminal activity (Heller et al., 2017). In the past five years, I've had former low-income students of color reach out for guidance with obtaining their GED high school equivalency diploma, along with requesting socioemotional support dealing with depression and drug use. I've also had several students I've seen on local television news and newspaper postings for theft charges and involvements in shootings. Unfortunately, it's rare, but from my experience many of my low-income students of color end up not meeting their truest potential. For the ones that have, oftentimes they're the students that were successful athletes and found mentors in the school.

Participants at Conquest were finding ways to voice themselves through a variety of school resistance responses. Students were failing their classes and disciplined for not changing their behavior to align with Conquest's expectations. Their resistance was seen within their repeated behaviors of receiving the same consequences repeatedly. Argued by resistance theorists, these students resisted Conquest's dominant ideology (Giroux, 1983). They did not

want to achieve the material and social success at the level Conquest promoted. These students wanted to live out their own vision of who they were and where they came from. However, based on their school performance, students were on track to either drop out or be expelled. Overall, these young men faced several obstacles preventing postsecondary opportunities that would help them enter the middle and upper-middle class social world.

Although Conquest's general intention is to improve the lives of all of its students, participants shared a different story. Those youth taking part in this study felt negatively impacted by the school with respect to their view of themselves and their view of their futures. Before attending Conquest, these young men were already dealing with personal, family, and financial issues. While attending Conquest, a few students added another struggle to their personal battles: A school's negative perception of their racial identity that was most damaging to their individual and future success.

Conclusion

The negative effects of an embedded American Dream ideology at Conquest played a significant role in the lives of research participants. Understanding the counternarrative of the American nightmare, these students' experienced exposed contradictions between Conquest's mission of helping them succeed and the negative school realities they encountered. Research participants experienced counternarratives compared to model middle and upper-middle class white students as described within interviews. Their experiences of school failure and punitive disciplinary measures reproduced and deepened their marginalization. Students voiced their disapproval through their resistance to school rules and expectations. They repeatedly received demerits and detentions for the same infractions of tardiness, excessive absences, insubordination, insolence, and clothing violations.

These young men felt their racial identity positioned them to be unfairly treated and felt less than their white peers. Interviews did not reveal one positive experience regarding their racial identity. Their performance and behavior in school seemed to come from feelings of frustration stemming from personal, financial, and most importantly, racial identity struggles.

The combination of Conquest's good taste dress code, along with unwritten social expectations of American patriotism and Conquest's blackface incident, helped me understand why research participants felt like Conquest was not a school for them, but rather a school for middle and upper-class white students. Would research participants in this study have had fewer school conflicts if Conquest had accepted their cultural backgrounds and included their voices in their school dress code and overall expectations? Would Conquest benefit from having disciplinary policies regarding overtly racist acts? Would Conquest benefit from having faculty, staff, and students participate in equity and diversity education to help make the school more welcoming for the students in this study? These questions are complex to answer; however, in the concluding chapter, I address them and attempt to find ways to improve the schooling experience of low-income students of color.

Chapter VII. Conclusion

This research study contributes to the literature on low-income male students of color by exploring the obstacles these young men faced while completing their high school education. A variety of studies have investigated failure, suspension/expulsion, and dropout rates using quantitative methods, often from a deficit-thinking or at-risk framework. It can be easily assumed the negative educational outcomes of low-income students of color are solely linked to a lack of financial resources. However, school documents, observations, and student interviews in this investigation revealed a deeper and more complex narrative of trauma, neglect, inattention to career interests, and institutional and overt racism can contribute to reasons why negative achievement rates may occur for marginalized populations. Although this study moved beyond in-school problems and into the out-of-school lives of low-income young men of color, the focus of the analysis was exploring the intertwined nature of those experiences while completing a high school education.

Although the size of the sample in this study does not warrant generalization to a larger population of low-income students of color, the findings here offer important links to past research and provide new insight into understanding the impact of school expectations on the socioemotional and racial identity of low-income young men of color. In the remainder of this chapter, I situate the findings in this study relative to the research questions. I then offer recommendations for practice and suggest directions for future research.

Returning to the Research Questions

How do low-income African American and Latino men view and experience their school environment with respect to school rules and policies reflecting dominant cultural values and ideologies? Additional questions included:

1. How do these students perceive the official rules, objectives, and expectations of their school?
2. What are the self-perceptions of these students within their school?
3. How do these students perceive and experience school personnel who enforce school rules and expectations (teachers, counselors, deans, and administrators) with respect to accepting their cultural identities?
4. What ideas do these students have on how to improve their schooling experience?

The participants spoke from a two-sided view of how they perceived and experienced their school environment. On one side, several students perceived Conquest as a good school for students to be successful. On the other side, students felt Conquest was not a school for them but rather a school for middle and upper-class white students. By focusing on perceptions and experiences, participants' struggles became clear regarding how school rules and expectations reflecting dominant cultural values adversely impacted them. All nine participants struggled with their academic performance and behavior in school. Students viewed tardy, insubordination, insolence, and dress code rules as inequitable. They believed Conquest's expectations exclusively focused on academic achievement and white-collar careers. Students felt they were not provided support on multiple levels, including career development based on their interests. They were not provided additional academic support at the level they needed and they did not receive socioemotional support or opportunities to develop a positive racial identity. Consequently, all students were in danger of not entering into the career tracks they desired. In Smalls' case, he was in danger of not graduating due to failing multiple classes. In the cases of Tyson, Denzel, Lopez, Big Bob, Pookie, and GoGo, they were in danger of being expelled.

Student interviews helped answer the second research question on how students perceived themselves. In short, students developed negative self-images as a result of their failing grades, school behavior struggles, and non-white racial identity. They saw themselves as irresponsible troublemakers who were seen as less than their resourced white peers. Students felt targeted and profiled for several reasons. They described incidents where school personnel accused them of misbehavior based on their physical appearance, dress, and behavior. Denzel expressed being a Black man will always cause him problems. Tyson referred to school dress codes favoring white students when he challenged head coverings and durags/do-rags rules. Pito and Lopez felt teachers targeted them because they were outspoken and opinionated. At no point during interviews did students share a positive self-image or interaction at Conquest. These students were ultimately developing negative self-perceptions based on their academic failures and multiple disciplinary infractions, along with Conquest's promotion of white students who excelled academically and alumnae who were recognized for achievements in white-collar fields.

To answer the third subquestion of how students perceived school personnel, I focused on both student interviews and school records to help gain a deeper insight. Overall, students did not directly say anything negative about the adults in the building. They did not describe teachers or other school personnel in an unfavorable way. However, negative interactions helped paint a clearer picture. Participants often expressed adults as uncaring. Denzel described an experience when a teacher did not realize he had a disability. Smalls shared, even when students reached out for academic support, teachers did not help. Smalls further felt targeted for minor disciplinary infractions of electronics and dress code rules. Pito and Lopez felt targeted and profiled by teachers. Even further, Tyson felt adults in the building would try to act like they wanted to help, but because of school rules and policies, they were not able to help at the level students really

needed. What I found interesting was the lack of involvement by school leaders. Students did not mention anything about the school leaders in the building. They focused their experiences on their incidents with teachers, deans, and security. Overall, students had distrustful relationships with Conquest's school personnel. They did not feel welcomed by many adults in the building, and this led to frustrations and multiple negative encounters.

The final research question helped me understand what students both wanted and needed to improve their schooling experiences. They expressed wanting more engaging classes and fewer strict rules regarding tardy and dress code policies. Pito wanted Conquest to provide more opportunities for students to select teachers and adults they wanted to work with because they did not trust most school personnel. Participants' interviews discussed wanting more career development and academic support. These young men wanted to do better in school, but their negative self-perceptions, defeatist mindset, and lack of resources stifled their potential. Overall, Conquest's expectations and rules continued to marginalize these young men.

The literature reviewed has begun to refocus how educators and researchers have viewed the problem of school failure and disciplinary rates of low-income men of color. Instead of framing the problem within an at-risk model by blaming and punishing low-income young men of color for their academic and behavior struggles, it can be more fruitful to incorporate at-promise, culturally responsive, and transformative frameworks to help dismantle marginalizing practices in schools. Low-income students of color are in need of equitable school policies and practices that focus on student strengths instead of struggles. In order for these students not to feel belittled, stereotyped, targeted, and overall unwelcomed, schools will need to provide equity training for faculty and staff and develop inclusive policies that remove marginalizing practices that negatively impact low-income students of color.

Recommendations for Practice

I offer a few ways for faculty, staff, and administrators to support low-income male students of color through their journey of completing their high school education. I begin by recommending the integration of the voice of low-income young men of color as a way to enhance school policies, expectations, dress code, and behavior rules. Next is a recommendation for schools to include cultural responsiveness into their policies, curriculum, and professional development.

Student Voice

A major finding in this study was the lack of student voice within school rules and expectations, along with contradictory messages found within the school's mission. This study's critical interpretation of school rules and expectations revealed embedded biases marginalizing African American and Latino students who had low-income backgrounds. The barriers students faced during this investigation were a lack of resources to meet high standards in mathematics and science, lack of socioemotional support for trauma and neglect, and expectations of speaking and dressing within white norms. Schools can find ways to interview or survey low-income students of color to enhance school policies, rules, and expectations. Students' voices can provide data that promote a more supportive environment and can prevent patterns of academic failure in targeted classes and behavior infractions linked to socioemotional struggles that have been neglected.

Cultural Responsiveness

An important implication for practice is that educators (e.g., teachers, deans, counselors, social workers, and school administrators) become culturally responsive by examining school spaces through the lens of institutional racism and how it manifests at multiple school levels

(Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019; Gay, 2010). This investigation illustrated that educators hold a powerful position over young people. Lopez indicated he felt profiled for being a “troublemaker” due to personal struggles of ADHD, and Tyson and Denzel felt they were negatively perceived for being non-white due to their dress preferences and skin color. A first step educators can take is examining personal deficit beliefs of students of color. Educators can begin by asking, what are my assumptions of African American, Latino, and all students of nonwhite backgrounds? As an educator, how do my beliefs about students maintain racist structures favoring dominant groups and subjugating marginalized groups within the school? Educators’ self-reflection on beliefs about people of color is essential for the continuation of dismantling racism.

In addition to becoming culturally responsive educators, school counselors and social workers can further support students of color from low-income backgrounds by becoming primary advocates and change agents. Culturally responsiveness is an important lens for school counselors and social workers to look through and take a lead for seeking additional academic resources, providing enhanced counseling support for students of color with backgrounds of trauma and neglect. Counselors and social workers are instrumental as they often enter the personal world of students in times of most need and can provide a voice for students struggling academically and behaviorally. Becoming a primary advocate and change agent for low-income students of color will help provide contextualized support as students navigate critical points of racial, socioeconomic, socioemotional, and adolescent socialization.

The absence of school administrators within school observations and interviews in this study revealed a need for the voice and presence of school leaders. Conquest High School’s mission promoted the recognition of the diverse backgrounds of students and held the greatest expectations of academic and socioemotional development; however, discovering contradictions

within school rules and expectations through student interviews and observations led to questioning school practices at Conquest. I found contradictions in the failing grades of research participants within mathematics and science classes related to academic expectations, along with multiple disciplinary demerits interconnected to cultural expectations. Conquest did not seem to recognize the low-resourced or non-white backgrounds of students.

Regarding academic and behavior expectations, school leaders can reevaluate their curriculum and school rules to better support low-income students of color. For example, Pito and Smalls explained they felt Conquest wanted them to fail and repeat courses with their younger peers, while Denzel, Lopez, and Tyson felt profiled for the way they dressed and acted. If student learning is the goal, rather than requiring low-income students to repeat courses they fail, providing added academic support may be more helpful before a class begins. Rather than issue multiple demerits due to breaking school rules, it may be more helpful for students to receive socioemotional counseling support while helping develop a positive racial identity.

School administrators who work on becoming culturally responsive educators can help advocate and provide an allied voice for marginalized students. Administrators can examine school policies and work toward addressing practices that have racial, cultural, and socioeconomic biases within academics and behavior expectations. School leaders can work at creating space for student voices to help shape policies. As Raby (2012) explained, “rules and their application also reproduce beliefs that are embedded in various forms of inequality” (p. 253). Raby recommended schools collaborate with students and community stakeholders when making decisions on school rules and periodically reevaluate the rationale of rules. Raby also recommended schools develop an appeals process focused on providing a continuous voice for students.

Outside of creating space for student voices within school rules, administrators can develop a safe space for professional development among faculty and staff for engagement and dialogue around racial and socioeconomic equity. Conquest High School, like many schools in the United States, had a majority white faculty and staff demographic. School administrators can examine their hiring practices and work toward understanding why their school does not have more educators of color. Expanding numbers of educators of color at the school is an important step toward racial equity in order for students to see authority figures look similar to them. More teachers, counselors, social workers, deans, and security of color would encourage a climate of belongingness of educators of color, students, and their families. Schools can be more strategic with their hiring practices and create recruitment pipelines with their graduates, along with colleges and organizations that seek educators of color. Moreover, this study in combination with my personal and professional experience have helped me understand that low-income young men of color not only need to have more educators of color who support and advocate for them; they also need individuals who can closely identify and relate to their low-income traumatic backgrounds to assist with experiential guidance and encouragement.

Directions for Future Research

The nine students in this study are not generalizable to what is needed to positively engage all low-income students of color academically and behaviorally. However, the findings from this small sample suggest important ideas that can contribute to critical areas of research. Future investigations using both qualitative and quantitative transformative research founded on at-promise and culturally responsive frameworks can help dissolve the deficit at-risk model. As an educator for over 15 years, this qualitative research experience was transformative for me. Hearing the voices of the students in this study helped me reveal authentic nuanced information I

would never have received without this opportunity. Before this investigation, I did not recognize that I was not provided an educational opportunity to develop a positive racial identity as a Latino son of Mexican immigrants and I did not see institutional racism at the level I do now. I believe the at-promise and culturally responsive frameworks can help future generations of low-income young men of color have a more positive socioemotional and racial identity, contributing to positive engagement with their school.

Qualitative studies can continue to shine a light on student voices. Student voices will be essential as researchers and policy makers look to make a positive impact on the educational outcomes of low-income students of color. Using counter-narratives can be powerful data sources that represent the voices of marginalized communities. Miller et al. (2020) argued that the next step to prevent inequity school practices is to address them through teaching and teacher education.

On a policy level, at-promise and culturally responsive studies have begun contributing to larger scale program development and policy changes through the voices of students. Illustrated by Rios' (2017) research, marginalized youth would benefit by being seen in a more positive light. These students should be given opportunities to grow rather than seen as threats. Rios used student voices in his books, articles, youth programs, documentaries, and speeches. Through Rios and other researchers' work, California's education law eliminated the term at risk and replaced it with at promise when referring to students with economic and social challenges (McKenzie, 2019).

I am forever changed by this investigation and believe qualitative research is pivotal in understanding a sociological research problem; however, I also believe many schools often do not change policies, practices, or curriculum without quantitative data. Large urban schools often

garner the attention of well-known research studies and practices; yet, more studies within increasing diverse suburban areas, such as Conquest, are needed. From my personal and professional experience of being a student and an educator in multiple suburban schools, negative academic achievement trends of students of color do not only occur within urban settings. Generalized data that helps add evidence in multiple school settings can help policy makers transform inequitable school policies and practices. For example, the Becoming a Man (BAM) mentoring program has shown quantitative signs of improving school-to-prison and dropout rates of young men of color in Chicago (Heller et al., 2017). Because BAM's quantitative data has helped illustrate the effectiveness of the program, schools involved in this research have been provided space and resources for low-income young men of color to receive socioemotional and academic support. Research within suburban schools can better help practitioners develop similar but more contextualized policy and curriculum changes that support students of color in improving their overall life opportunities after high school (e.g., postsecondary training, college attainment, employment, and earning a living wage). Outside of research providing resources for student support, additional research is also needed to dive deeper into why students of color are disproportionally disciplined over white students, less likely to be in classrooms where teachers set high expectations, and are less likely to be enrolled in gifted and talented programs.

Research has pointed out that existing educational policies and practices often fail to produce positive schooling results for low-income young men of color (Jackson et al., 2014). To continue to support our nation's young men of promise, it is essential to shift research and prevent effective frameworks of at-promise and culturally responsiveness, along with programs like BAM, from becoming isolated. A policy level recommendation that can further the work of

researchers would be the development of a national source of effective studies, practices, and policies centered on low-income men of color in education. On a national level, this source can dramatically increase vital individual and collaborative research findings.

Because trends have not shifted after numerous educational reforms, continuous research is needed to improve suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates, along with academic achievement trends of our underserved low-income young men of color to ultimately transform employment and criminalization rates of African American and Latino men. By better improving policies and practices at not only the secondary level, but also within a pre-K–20 model, we can expand the opportunity gap and better connect our young men of promise to apprenticeship, postsecondary training, and college opportunities that can ultimately improve the criminal justice system by preventing low-income young men of color from becoming socially and economically disenfranchised.

Conclusion

This study offered a deeper look into the school experiences and perceptions of nine low-income students of color who attended a demographically transitioning high school. Conquest High School was a historically white suburban high school 15 years before this study took place; in 2018, it was a predominantly African American and Latino American high school. My hope with this study was to add on to previous research that dismantles at-risk models. These models further marginalize the marginalized within school rules and expectations that negatively impact low-income students of color by not addressing their career and socioemotional needs, stripping away their positive racial identity. This study helped discover how complex social expectations embedded within Western European white ideology and individual life experiences can contribute toward negative outcomes for students of color with low-resourced backgrounds. This

research also helped reveal the need for schools with changing demographics to have more research and resources to reevaluate school rules and expectations and become more culturally responsive. If schools do not become culturally responsive, the true risk is the lost potential of low-income young men of color who can make a profound impact in local, state, national, and global communities.

I learned through this research that the voices of low-income students of color should be held as central for transformative change that promotes a positive socioemotional and racial identity for all students, with special attention to students with low-resourced backgrounds. Interviews helped shed light on research participants' need for socioemotional support due to academic and personal struggles stemming from limited access to resources and trauma and neglect backgrounds. School documents helped unveil a white structure built upon norms and beliefs negating the positive identity of African American and Latino American students of color. What stood out as the most significant learning point of this study was students asking for a more inclusive environment that offered more resources for meeting personal and occupational goals. If schools were to provide a more supportive environment and curriculum that focused on the socioemotional and racial identity of low-income students of color, I wonder what trends we would see within educational outcomes.

As suburban schools continue to become more socioeconomically and racially diverse, it is essential for schools to reevaluate policies and practices that reproduce inequity. As research has pointed out, schools are critical spaces that highly influence the future of youth. As low-income young men of color develop into adulthood, it will be critical for schools to radically transform and embrace an increasingly diverse student body. Educators practicing inequitable pedagogy due to past methods will need to reflect and reevaluate their biases and methods. As

Conquest High School has experienced a shift in demographics, what are the next steps to develop equitable policies and practices, and how can other suburban schools learn from each other to become more inclusive communities for all students? Referenced in the implications section, schools will need data sources that include student voices through counternarratives to transform inequitable policies and practices.

What was missing from this study were the perspectives of school faculty, staff, and administrators, along with parents in the community. Future research using voices of all stakeholders can help assess perceptions and needs that negatively impact students of color. Additional research on at-promise, culturally responsive, and strength-based models that positively support the socioemotional needs and racial identity of all students is needed within suburban schools with changing demographics, disinvestment trends, and systemic racism to break away from inequitable practices. Comprehensive research which focuses on the strengths of students and their contextualized cultural backgrounds can continue to transform negative outcomes that plague the educational worlds of low-income students of color. The continued development of culturally responsive pedagogy and the at-promise framework are critical in this movement. U.S. schools continue to be based within a Western European structure founded within white supremacist ideologies. However, it is more important now than ever for school policies and practices to continue to transform and heal from past explicit and current implicit oppressive structures to meet the needs of an increasing diverse suburban student population and in preparation for an increasingly nonwhite Western European world.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

School Experience

1) Tell me about yourself?
2) Talk about your past and current school experiences.
3) Describe a typical day in high school for you.
4) How would you describe your relationships with teachers and other staff members (counselors, deans, security, coaches, assistant principal, principal, etc.)?
5) Talk about any experiences where you felt mistreated by the school and why.
6) Describe your relationships with your school friends.
7) What are your feelings about the types of subjects you are learning in school?
8) Describe how you see and evaluate your school experience.
9) What do you believe is the purpose of school?

Achievement Orientation

10) What are your dreams?
11) How can you reach your dreams?
12) How do you see school helping or not helping you reach your dreams?
13) What activities are you involved with at school?
    a. Tell me more about this . . ..

Social and Cultural Identity

14) Tell me about your family?
15) Tell me about your neighborhood and friends?

16) How do you identify yourself in terms of race, gender, and economic status?

17) How is your identity important to you?

School Rules and Expectations

18) What are some of the problems you see with your school?

19) What are the best and worst parts of school?

20) Describe how you feel in school (e.g., classroom, hallways, and cafeteria).

21) Describe how the school has helped or not helped you.

22) Describe your feelings of respect from adults in school.

23) Describe your feelings of respect toward the adults in school.

24) Describe your school rules and how you feel about them?

25) Describe how groups of students are treated by teachers and other staff members.

26) Describe how students treat teachers, staff members, and each other.

27) How would you change your school to make it better for you?

28) What are ways you would change the school?

    a. Tell me more about the classes, rules, and faculty/staff you would change.