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**Race, Culture and Agency: Examining the Ideologies and Practices of
U.S. Teachers of Black Male Students**

Abstract

This study examines teachers of Black male students in a United States secondary school setting. Qualitative methods were used to document teachers' ideologies of and practices with their Black male students. In general, teachers drew upon competing structural and cultural explanations of Black male social and academic outcomes, while also engaging in practices that contested school barriers for Black males. Teacher beliefs about and practices with their Black male students were inconsistent in many ways, yet their agency on behalf of Black males might be understood as essential to Black male educational progress.

Key words: Black males, teacher ideology, teacher agency, resistance, secondary education, teacher education

Race, Culture and Agency: Examining the Ideologies and Practices of U.S. Teachers of Black Male Students

1. Introduction

A review of the occupational, social, and educational outcomes for Black men paints a picture of racial stratification in American society. Black men experience high unemployment rates (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013; Wilkinson, 1999), vast income inequalities compared to their White male counterparts regardless of class standing (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003), and are differentially treated in the judicial system (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011; Mustard, 2001). Reports on Black male educational outcomes are similarly disconcerting and may be related to some of the aforementioned social outcomes (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Noguera, 2003b). Although there is evidence of improvement in the educational progress of Black males (Harper, 2012; McGee & Martin, 2011; Wright, 2011), it is clear that more can be done to support them in the educational system.

Schools are powerful institutions for the maintenance of class, racial, and gender stratification. Through school resegregation, academic and ability tracking, differential learning expectations, and race-gendered discipline disparities, schools participate in the process of social and cultural reproduction for Black males. At their worst, schools are the “pump” in the school-to-prison pipeline for many Black boys (Noguera, 2003a). However, social reproduction through school cannot occur without the contribution of institutional agents such as teachers (Tyson, 2003). Thus, an examination of the ecology of Black male schooling should consider the role that teachers play as one of many important agents in the educational outcomes of Black boys.

In this article, I examine the ideologies and practices of teachers of Black males in a United States (U.S.) school context. In particular, I highlight the ways in which teachers think

and talk about their Black male students using structural and cultural explanations of Black male educational and social outcomes. I also bring attention to teacher practices, and how teachers enact agency in ways that contest the structural impediments Black males face in school. **The findings of this study are contextualized within a particular U.S. city but might also be relevant to other domestic and international communities where racialized or indigenous populations are marginalized in school.**

2. Critical Theories of Black Male Schooling

Critical theories examining schooling have generally described schools as contested locations of social and cultural reproduction (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983a; McLaren, 2003). By this I mean that they are institutions controlled by dominant groups designed to meet the needs of a capitalist society by reproducing a differentiated workforce and an economically stratified society (Anyon, 1980, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Gatto, 1992). Furthermore, as ideological institutions of the state, schools reproduce dominant cultural knowledge, literacies, and norms (Althusser, 1971; Bourdieu, 1977; Freire, 1970). In other words, schools contribute to the raced, classed, and gendered stratification of society and the reproduction of White middle-class ideology.

For instance, Black males encounter structural barriers of race and class when they attend resegregated schools, or are segregated within school via ability tracking (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Orfield & Lee, 2007). Both neighborhood segregation and within-school segregation produce access to differential school knowledge as the curriculum and instructional styles differ by the racial and economic makeup of the school (Anyon, 1981; Gatto, 1992; Oakes, 2005).

Furthermore, the race-gendered discipline disparities Black males experience unnecessarily exposes them to the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012; Noguera, 2003a).

In addition to social role differentiation and stratification, schools are expected to transmit “mainstream” White middle-class cultural knowledge and norms as a political act of assimilation, control, and constructing a national identity (Dreeben, 1987; Hirsch, 1987; Parsons, 1959). As socializing institutions, schools emphasize particular forms of cultural capital, which Bourdieu (1977, 1990) suggests reflects the knowledge, dispositions, orientations, goods, and credentials unique to dominant social groups. These forms of capital are privileged within the context of school and are often used for social and cultural exclusion. Such cultural capital may include formal education and degree attainment, access to personal libraries, a large vocabulary, participation in cultural outings (such as museums and vacations), and greater access to technology. Cultural capital also may include certain forms of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), which are deep-seated cultural dispositions, such as particular educational and occupational expectations, that may result from the concerted cultivation of parents (Dumais, 2002; Lareau, 2003).

Theoretically, members of the dominant groups already possessing such capital will experience success in school and, subsequently, acquire economic capital and continued social dominance. However, by privileging White middle-class ideology, school institutions undermine the ideology, funds of knowledge, and cultural wealth of non-dominant cultures, which in many cases puts school and home culture at odds (Milner IV, 2013; Moll & Gonzalez, 1997; Yosso, 2006). As such, communities of students who do not have access to knowledge of the dominant ideology or are unwilling to adopt it may experience dissonance in school (Fordham, 1996;

Ogbu, 2008; Willis, 1977). Schools writ large are powerful institutions in the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities.

2.1 Teacher Ideologies and Black Male Schooling

Teachers play an important role in the education of Black males (Howard, 2008; Milner IV, 2007), and as agents of a state apparatus, teachers may perpetuate dominant ideology in particular ways. For example, researchers have examined how teachers, who are predominantly White, middle class, and female (Coopersmith, 2009), rely on White middle-class ideology to inform their practices (Ferguson, 2005; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010). In this way, many teachers conceive of and engage in practices with their Black male students that greatly influence the students' educational prospects.

For example, many White educators resist any discussion or analysis of racial issues, choosing instead to adopt “colorblind” approaches to viewing their students (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Milner IV, 2008a; Walton et al., 2014). This might include claiming to not see or be influenced by the racial makeup of their students, or assuming school policies are racially neutral (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Solorzano, 1997). In adopting “colorblind” approaches, White teachers exonerate themselves in the maintenance of racial hegemony, and fail to understand how social and institutional racism pervade the lives of students of color both inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, by avoiding critical examinations of racism, many educators rely on their own understandings of students of color, which in many cases reflect dominant stereotypical and deficit views of culture (Delpit, 1995; Solorzano, 1997).

For instance, many teachers rely on normative assumptions regarding the intellectual capacities of Black males and thus lower their academic expectations of their Black male students. As a result, Black boys regularly find themselves tracked into lower ability, remedial,

or special education programs and out of higher ability or gifted education programs (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Oakes, 2005). Similarly, when teachers rely on White normative assumptions of Black male deviancy, they frequently misinterpret the behaviors of Black males and are catalysts in the differential treatment in discipline and the overrepresentation of Black boys in school suspensions and expulsions (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramani, 2010; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The relationship between White teachers and Black boys in the U.S. draws comparison to the experiences of communities in different countries. Black and indigenous communities in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia attend schools with White teachers holding similar deficit views. Teachers of these students often hold low academic expectations, and boys of color are disproportionately disciplined. (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Bodkin-Andrews, Denson, & Bansel, 2013; Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawî, 2005; Solomon, 1992; Strand, 2012). The parallels of these particular experiences draw attention to the varying ways White ideological hegemony impedes the educational progress for boys of color across geographical and social contexts.

2.2 Teacher Agency

Though schools may be sites of racial, economic, and ideological domination, they are inevitably contested sites where individuals and collective groups enact agency in resisting the structural and cultural dominance of schooling. Most research on this type of school resistance has focused on student agency. In particular, research on student agency has examined the ways youth come to understand schooling as a reproducer of inequalities and engage in acts of resistance against school expectations and process (Aggleton, 1987; MacLeod, 1987; Ogbu,

2008; Solomon, 1992). For instance, students might consciously resist the temporal or spatial arrangements of school processes, or reject the bourgeois knowledge, behavioral expectations, and achievement ideology of the school (Aggleton & Whitty, 1985; Solomon, 1992; Willis, 1977). Students might also resist the social reproductive nature of school by consciously achieving academically, resisting expectations of failure with the intent of using educational attainment as a tool for social justice (Carter, 2008; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

While most research on the role of agency and resistance in school has focused on students, less is known about teachers' roles in the process of reproduction (Tyson, 2003), particularly with regard to how teachers may enact agency in contesting racial hegemony in schools. There are, however, a growing number of examples of how teachers may resist cultural domination through critical and culturally relevant pedagogical practices in the classroom.

For instance, teachers engaged in critical pedagogy create the conditions for students to acquire a critical consciousness about social inequalities, systems of oppression and the nature of society. Through a dialogue of critique, reflection and action, teachers and students collectively come to know the world as it really is and are empowered to act as change agents towards social justice (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2003). Critical theorists argue that there is no one way to enact critical pedagogy but that the theory is put into practice using a wide variety of approaches and strategies with the ultimate goal of social justice and a critical democracy (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Wink, 2011). This supposes that teachers demonstrate "political clarity" and possess an awareness of the existence and causes of social inequalities (Bartolome, 1994; Freire, 1987).

Critical teachers demonstrate agency when they account for the wealth of knowledge students bring into the classroom, allowing space for teachers and students to co-construct

knowledge (Cammarota, Romero, & Stovall, 2014; Freire, 1970; Seiler, 2001). In doing so, they resist traditional unidirectional learning experiences where knowledge only exists within the teacher (Freire, 1970). By using the classroom as a democratic space, students and teachers have collectively considered emancipatory questions regarding the nature of knowledge, power, racism, class conflict, corporate power, media representation, and other social issues pertaining to students lives (Alegria, 2014; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; McLaren, 2003; Stovall, 2006). There is also growing evidence that teachers subvert hegemonic school systems in more subtle ways through advocacy and activism for marginalized students, or by acting as cultural brokers by helping students navigate the institutional norms and procedures of the school (Bartolome, 2004; Irvine, 1991; Ramsey, 2012).

Similarly, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy contests the perpetuation of White middle-class knowledge by drawing upon the cultural knowledge, experiences and strengths of Black male students to better meet their academic and social needs (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, when teachers scaffold using the prior academic and cultural knowledge of Black students, they create accessible learning opportunities and decrease potential school-home cultural dissonances.

For example, in addition to rejecting cultural deficit ideologies by maintaining high expectations for their culturally diverse students, teachers employing culturally relevant pedagogies might teach math, science or critical literacy using multicultural texts, performance, or popular music such as Hip-Hop (Emdin & Lee, 2012; Lopez, 2011; Nelson-Barber & Estrin, 1995; Tate, 1995). They might also seek out, or have students bring in, their cultural experiences and community concerns to provide context to the academic content (Esposito, Davis, & Swain, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 1995). In doing so, teachers come to better understand their students'

cultures and can make school curriculum relevant to students' lives (Howard, 2001; Hynds et al., 2011; Lynn, 2006). Additionally, teachers can engage students in a critical understanding and problem solving of social issues that their students identify as important (Esposito, et al., 2012; Jocson, 2009; Lopez, 2011).

While the critical and culturally relevant pedagogy literature pertaining to teacher agency and resistance is growing, there is still more to learn about how teachers both accommodate and resist school as a hegemonic force for Black males.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Site and Participants

The findings presented in the study derive from an ethnographic study conducted at Central High,¹ a suburban school of over 2,000 students located in a large Western United States city. **Data were collected during the 2008-09 school year** through various interview strategies, document collection, and field observations that focused on interactions between and among students, teachers, and administrators, and school policy outcomes. The study sought to examine the educational experiences of Black middle-class male youth.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was acquired for this study and IRB guidelines were followed for the protection of human subjects. The young men, their parents and school personnel all completed assent and consent forms that were explained orally and in written form. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants and are used to protect subject identities. Access to the school site was granted by the principal and school district.

Using purposive sampling (Warwick & Lininger, 1975), ten Black male students and their families were selected, six of whom were middle class and four of whom were working

class. By including both middle and working-class students in the study sample I was able to see if and how class mediated the experiences of Black males in a particular context bounded by space and time. To identify primary teacher informants, a teacher nomination approach was used, whereby each student recommended a teacher that he believed could speak to his educational experiences (Cooper, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Six teachers were identified, with some of the teachers nominated by more than one student participant.

Central High School is a racially and economically diverse suburban school. At the time of the study, the student population was 29% Black, 28 % Asian, 19 % Latino, 11 % White, and 13 % Other; and almost half of the students qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch.ⁱⁱ The school was chosen due to its sizeable Black middle-class population. The surrounding community consists of a large number of new tract and custom homes, apartments, retail shops, a community college, a new public library, and other public and private facilities (e.g., golf driving ranges, hospitals). Residents are primarily middle-class families; however, the school catchment area also includes students who are bussed from several neighboring communities that are more socioeconomically diverse.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The student participants took part in three separate formal interviews. The first interview, conducted during the fall, asked participants to respond to grand-tour questions covering their life history. This included questions about their personal biographies and experiences in school from elementary to the present. The second interview, conducted at the end of the fall, was an elicitation of a participant photography project (Author, 2012; Wang & Burris, 1997). The students were provided digital cameras and produced photo documentaries about their lives. The

interview allowed them to elaborate on the meanings of their images, providing insight into their lives as they interpret it. The third interview, conducted in the spring, explored their experiences as Black male students, and how they made meaning of race, racism and manhood. Unstructured questions were used during field observations at the school and were yielded as part of casual interactions with the participants (Spradley, 1979). These informal interviews largely took place in classrooms during breaks, in hallways before or after class, in the cafeteria, or at sporting events.

The parents and teachers were each interviewed formally one time. Interviews with the parents examined their perspective of their son's educational histories, their own involvement with their sons' schooling, and their views on race and manhood. Interviews with teachers also examined their perceptions of the Black male student participants' schooling experiences. In addition, teacher interviews explored each of their general experiences working with Black male students, as well as their understanding of Black male educational outcomes. Unstructured interview questions were used during field observations with the teachers. As a method of triangulation, the collective interviews were multivocal interpretations (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) of the same phenomenon and important to the discovery of meaning for each set of participants. All structured and unstructured interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and later transcribed.

Observations of students and teachers were conducted within classrooms and other school spaces related to the school day and afterschool activities. Teachers were observed in the classroom on multiple occasions over the duration of the study but were also shadowed during hallway duty or in other school spaces such as the teachers' lounge. In the classroom, teachers would occasionally ask me for help with checking classwork, which placed my observations

somewhere in the middle of the “detached” and “full participant” observational continuum (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Triangulation of analysis was built into the data collection process, as multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, document collection) were used to confirm or disconfirm the findings (Patton, 1990). Data analysis followed a qualitative interpretive approach described by Erickson (1986) as modified analytic induction. Interviews and field notes were transcribed, and the data corpus was read thoroughly and repeatedly to get a holistic sense of the phenomenon. Atlas.ti qualitative research software was used for coding and managing the data. The data were bracketed into elements that were analyzed independently for non-contextual meaning (Denzin, 1989). After coding and bracketing, the data corpus was again reviewed thoroughly to search for key linkages among the different forms of data, with a goal of developing an initial set of empirically grounded assertions. The data corpus was then reviewed again as a means to test initial assertions in light of confirming and disconfirming evidence. Assertions were then organized into major themes and subthemes, and the data were reconstructed and contextualized within the historical moment in which they were produced.

In addition to triangulating data as they were collected, assertions were evaluated by identifying consistent interpretive patterns among student, parent, and teacher narratives and in field notes. Finally, member-checking was employed by providing participants with manuscript copies and asking for feedback on generated final themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.3 Reflexivity

As an educated Black male, and in my late 20's at the time of the study, I was both an insider and an outsider in relationship to the phenomena of study. I was an insider because of the

racial and gender characteristics I shared with the male participants. I might also be considered an insider due to my familiarity with the local community and school districts having spent much of my youth living in the region. At the same time I was considered an outsider due to my institutional role as a university researcher. It had also been over a decade since I had lived in the community and thus I held a finite temporal presence in the community and at the school site.

The insider-outsider position I held is often referred to as the “halfie” (1991), a postmodern view of the researcher as both marginalized from the culture of study and apart of the culture at the same time. This also presumes that my identity and my identity’s relationship to power shifts among varying context and settings. For example, power dynamics between me as a researcher and the subjects were more egalitarian when I watched sports and talked music with the Black male student participants than it was when I conducted classroom observations. However, considering my position as a “halfie” I acknowledge the barriers to intersubjectivity; that is, anything that I document must be understood as a “partial truth” (Clifford, 1986). Thus I recognize the limitations of my own subjective interpretation and cannot assert disingenuously that my claims are completely neutral or objective. However, my intent in conducting research of this matter is to not only privilege the often ignored voices of Black male youth, but to also highlight the voices and experiences of the teachers and families that support Black males towards the goal of educational success and social mobility.

3.4 Teacher Participants

The teachers ranged in age, number of years taught, and discipline. Racially, teachers identified as either White or Black (see Table 1). One male teacher was nominated, and was nominated by multiple students. As one of two Black male teachers on campus (and one that

taught an elective course on African American history) it was clear that Mr. Cox was a recognizable figure on campus and was admired by many Black male students.

It is important to know that, in addition to being identified by the male participants as teachers to whom they related, the teacher participants were generally identified by other students, other teachers, and administrators as respected and exceptionally effective teachers. Field observations confirmed these perceptions, as the teachers demonstrated strong content knowledge and culturally relevant pedagogical and assessment techniques as well as held high expectations of all their students. For example, in her freshman English class on a Monday morning, Ms. Langford began the class by rapping about her weekend and the learning objectives for the day. The students laughed at her novice style of rap, but it was clear that her students were engaged. Additionally, a review of the books that she made available in her class for sustained silent reading sessions included a large selection of culturally diverse authors as well as biographies of influential and popular figures, including Malcolm X and Michael Jordan.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Students referred to these teachers with phrases such as “challenging” and “who don’t play,” which meant that the teachers had high expectations and held students accountable for their actions and academic success. Further, as evidenced by their being selected, the teachers had developed meaningful relationships with their students. For instance, Garrett, a student participant, referred to Ms. Westin as his “guidance counselor.” One could argue that these teachers “get it” in terms of finding ways to connect with their students and to produce positive student outcomes. Because these teachers were identified as exceptional and were well regarded within the school community, it is important to understand what they believe about their Black male students as well as how they engage in practice with those students.

4. Findings

The participating teachers in this study were asked about their educational experiences and practices with Black male students, and what they believe contributes to these students' academic successes and failures. The findings included the various and sometimes-discordant ways these teachers made sense of the factors that contribute to Black male academic and social success and failure. When reflecting on their experiences with Black males, the teachers drew largely upon both structural and cultural explanations. Structural explanations included the role that race and racism play in the lives of their Black male students. Cultural explanations focused primarily on the students' home culture and access to certain forms of cultural capital. Markedly, the teachers demonstrated agency through suspended judgment, advocacy for Black males, and challenging student resistance perceived as self-defeating.

4.1 Structural Impediments: Race and Racism

During structured interviews, teachers were asked whether they believed and to what degree they understood barriers that Black males may face in school and society. Each of the six teachers spoke, to varying degrees, about the role that race plays as a barrier for Black males in the school and in society at large. Ms. Davis, a young Black teacher, characterized how racist perceptions of Black men create barriers in school:

They are feared, probably second grade on, maybe earlier . . . I think that many teachers fear them, many teachers are attracted to them, many teachers are curious about them because of the idea of the Black male. And so if you have that in society, you will have that with people in society who teach in schools.

Ms. Beech, a young White teacher, similarly noted how Black males are stereotyped, stating, “I think that there are stereotypes. And one of the stereotypes is that African American boys tend to have more behavior problems. And that’s a stereotype.” The fear, curiosity, and stereotyping of Black males Ms. Davis and Ms. Beech speak of, often lead to both the sensationalization and overregulation of the Black male body (Collins, 2004).

The overregulation of the Black male body within the school is evident in how teachers spoke about the school’s problem of high disciplinary actions for Black males. Each teacher provided their own observations of how Black males were treated by school staff. Ms. Langford, a veteran White teacher, observed how racism is prevalent in the practices of some of her colleagues:

I have really high expectations for my colleagues, and so, when I hear about some of the things that are possibly going on, you know, I don’t know what to do. There’s a teacher on campus that I notice, and kids have told me, “Gosh, Ms. Langford, she’s just really, really racist.” And so, okay, what do I do with that information? When I notice the OCS [on-campus suspension] list, and I notice that pretty much it’s from her class, it’s African American males, and it bothers me.

Teachers such as Ms. Langford were conscious of the overrepresentation of Black males in on-campus suspensions and the role of teachers’ classroom management practices and interpretations of Black male behaviors in perpetuating disciplinary practices. These teachers were critical of other colleagues who appeared to be quicker in disciplining students for any infraction.

Sitting in the OCS room with the OCS supervisor, a middle-aged White woman, we observed a male student sent in at the beginning of the instructional period for eating a sandwich

in class. Shaking her head, the supervisor, who is also a teacher, stated “Referrals like this happen far too often, and it’s usually a result of poor classroom management” (Field notes, October 9, 2008). In addition to citing poor classroom management practices, teachers such as Ms. Davis noted the role that race plays in Black male discipline, stating “It’s easy for administrators or schools to suspend or teachers to get rid of them because of the expectation factor and because of the stats that says Blacks are violent, and they commit more of these crimes.” She goes on to point out that when a Black male makes a mistake in school, “He’s a criminal. If Johnny stumbles, he’s a teenager,” a reference to how the actions of Black and White males are interpreted differently and thus disciplined differently.

Indeed, both Ms. Langford’s observation of Black male overrepresentation in OCS and Ms. Davis’ explanation of the unfair treatment of Black males are consistent with literature on Black male discipline. Black males are overrepresented in school discipline and are often disciplined more harshly, at greater rates, and for more subjective infractions (e.g., willful defiance) than their White male counterparts (Losen, 2011; Monroe, 2005). The fear, curiosity, stereotypes, and general ideological frameworks that teachers may possess about their Black male students seem to be at the root of these disparities.

4.2 Cultural Impediments: Middle-Class Cultural Capital

When describing the barriers that Black males faced in school and society, the teachers frequently focused on race as a structural barrier and identified ways that Black males were criminalized and denied opportunities to learn. However, when teachers were asked what factors they believe contribute to disparities in Black male achievement, structural factors such as race were downplayed in favor of cultural impediments. The more prominent explanations focused

on the lack of middle-class cultural capital employed by some Black males and their families. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that middle-class cultural capital is often privileged within schools and is a tool for social and cultural exclusion. The school of study and the student participants were economically diverse, and the teacher data revealed distinctions in how teachers perceived the cultural capital of their Black middle- and working-class families, showing favor for middle-class cultural capital.

One particular form of cultural capital favored by teachers was certain parental involvement practices. In general, teachers' expectations of parental involvement include a visible presence at school events, volunteerism, accessibility, and academic support in the home. Such was the case with teachers in this study, who relied on normative middle-class expectations of parental involvement to explain the academic success or failure of their students.

For example, the involvement practices of the middle-class parents in the study were described more favorably and highlighted the way that middle-class parents supported their sons' education. Ms. Beech described how the Strauss family monitored their son Sean's education:

I met both of his parents, trying to help them select courses for the next year, and his parents are very supportive. Almost a little too [supportive] . . . they wanted him to take a lot of AP [advanced placement] or honors classes, and I remember he was struggling with, "Do I take that or do I play football?" and so on, but very supportive parents, wanted him to do the best.

In addition to being praised for monitoring their sons' education, middle-class parents were also praised for keeping their children accountable. Ms. Langford attributed the behavioral performances of Billy, a middle-class Black student, to his father's presence, declaring:

Billy, I always found was very, very respectful. Absolutely respectful. So that tells me

right there that there's some parent involvement. . . Dad seemed to be the biggest figure in his life, no doubt. I mean, Mr. Anderson is not going to allow his son to fail, if he can possibly help it.

Both Ms. Beech and Ms. Langford praised the cultural capital of middle-class families, including the ways that parents developed relationships with teachers and customized their children's education. Ms. Langford also attributed Billy's "good behavior" to parental involvement. She implied that complicity with school behavioral norms was an indicator of appropriate parent socialization practices, and thus an indicator of academic success. Based on Billy's academic records, however, he would not be considered an academic high achiever by traditional school measures. Ms. Langford's interpretation may reveal something about her and other teachers' ideology: that good behavior is assumed to be a reflection of academic intelligence (Hatt, 2012), and that "normal" children subscribe to bourgeois behavioral norms.

In contrast to these perspectives on middle-class families, the parental involvement practices and lack of middle-class cultural capital of working-class Black families were seen as an impediment to Black male success. **Working-class families were described by teachers as uninvolved, lacking male role models, difficult to develop relationships with, and enabling of resistant behaviors.** Ms. Langford described her struggle to communicate with a working-class mother with regard to the son's academic work:

Zero from home. Absolutely zero from home. I probably talked to that mom probably six times. [I told her] "What I would like you to do is could you just sign the assignment sheet, because I have them write down every day what they're going to do. I'll sign it indicating he knows what to do, you sign it indicating that you've actually seen the homework and that's communication between us on a daily basis." Well, two days have

passed and that was it. And so we're done. And so that's the message this mother is sending to her kid.

Other teachers, such as Ms. Beech, explained that they “see a lot of enabling with a lot of parents, just defending students' actions . . . instead of working with me to try to get a solution.”

Ms. Beech bemoaned the “enabling” practices of working-class parents, including what she perceives as the perpetuation and defense of the maladaptive behaviors of Black males. Black teachers such as Ms. Price and Mr. Cox however, offer a somewhat more nuanced explanation that accounts for class as a structural barrier but still positions middle-class cultural capital as the norm. Ms. Price expounded:

What I've found to be true is that the majority of your education does come from school, but that's reinforced in the home and in the community, and I think what they really lack is that reinforcement . . . you know, talk to their children academically in academic language and gave them exposures to museums and travel, and, you know, books and things...It wasn't just the education at school. It still has a bit to do with the social economic, and so you can look at people that have moved up in social class, and they're new to it, and so they may not know, even though they have a little more clout, more money, really how to benefit their children to the point where it helps to excel them.

Similarly, Mr. Cox identified the lack of cultural capital as well as economic barriers for Black families:

They don't have the home life...they don't have the encyclopedia, they don't have the computer, they don't have a quiet area where they can do their homework. They're not eating right and so they don't have the nutrients to focus for a long time, you know what I mean? And so all these things come into effect, or they just don't see hope.

Both Black and White teachers drew upon bourgeois expectations of parental involvement and normalized the acquisition of middle-class cultural capital to explain discrepancies in Black male achievement. While the White teachers tended to blame maladaptive Black culture for the academic struggles of Black males, Black teachers were more likely to allude to economic barriers as contributing to the academic struggles of Black boys and the support Black families could provide. For the Black teachers, working-class Black families were not seen as resistant to education but simply lacking access to middle-class specific social and cultural capital. This position reflects the Black teachers' preference for dominant middle-class cultural capital, while at the same time critiquing the way certain forms of cultural capital work against Black males in the school. However, regardless of the racial background of the teacher, White middle-class cultural capital is still positioned as the norm to be achieved by Black males and their families. Thus, it seems that these teachers, as ideological agents of a state apparatus, perpetuate dominant ideology in particular ways (Althusser, 1971)

4.3 Teacher Agency

The teachers in this study drew upon both structural and cultural explanations of Black male (under)achievement, demonstrating how their ideological understandings are complex but not always congruent. However, in particular instances, the teachers enacted agency in how they responded to the real or perceived barriers to Black male success. In some cases, they were intentional in suspending judgment about their Black male students. In other cases, they acted as advocates for their students, interceding when race was seen as a matter of contention. Finally, the teachers maintained high academic expectations and kept students accountable for their actions.

4.3.1 Suspending judgment. As teachers of Black males, the participants were conscious of the significance of race with regard to how Black boys are perceived. The teachers expressed the importance of seeing beyond Black male behavioral performances or academic and behavioral statistics, and of treating Black men with respect. Ms. Johnson explained:

I have always found African American males to be some of the most intelligent and analytical students. If you talk to them with respect, whatever's going on, they can reason through it. They are not reactionary if you approach them the correct way . . . But when you look at the statistics, how many students are being suspended and who those students are and who are failing and who are getting poor test scores, what I experience and see is not reflected in that data. There is a real need to understand the maturity of the African American male in regards to being a man. If I am teaching high school, I am speaking to a man, and I have to do everything in my power to hold that ground and to respect them.

Suspending judgment and treating Black men with respect were particularly evident in how Ms. Westin handled a situation in which her student Garrett, a participant in the study, had been disciplined for a behavioral infraction and labeled a troublemaker:

But to me, students do things and you have to forgive and forget, and you have to move on and look at their good points and so I thought about it, and I was like, "you know, I could let it cause me to have a different opinion about him" or I can say, "you know, let's forget about that and what can we do?" And that's pretty much what I did. I asked him about it one day, and he told me in his words what happened. Now, I don't know if that's exactly what happened, but . . . I can kind of understand, and just in seeing kids' interactions, you know, people make mistakes. Things happen.

In this particular situation, Ms. Westin demonstrated agency, choosing to avoid interacting with Garrett through his discipline record and the subsequent discursive process of labeling. Instead, she sought his standpoint and created a space for both her and Garrett to construct their own relationship outside the dominant school discourse on Black male behavioral deficiencies.

Similarly, other teachers spoke of learning to understand Black male behavioral, linguistic, and attitudinal performances and “not overreacting to maybe their attempts to find themselves in class.” While Black teachers generally attributed their ability to suspend judgment to their own cultural congruence with their Black students, White teachers articulated learning through having their preconceptions challenged. Ms. Beech, a White teacher, told this story:

I remember when I was a student teacher. I had a student. Very, very tall, skinny African American boy. I was like 22 when I started teaching, and he walks in and he has a girl, [*sucking noises*] slopping up the saliva [e.g., kissing]. He has all these chains hanging down and just walking in with the gait, and I was thinking, “Oh my gosh . . . am I going to be able to teach this child?” And he actually ended up being one of my favorite students, and he still to this day is. It was just, that was a stereotype, and I’m glad I learned it as a student teacher that you shouldn’t have stereotypes because I stereotyped him.

Suspending judgment and being open to having their preconceptions challenged are important attributes of these teachers. Moreover, their willingness to learn from their Black male students provided opportunities for increasing the cultural competencies needed to more effectively meet the needs of Black boys.

4.3.2 Advocacy. The ability to suspend judgment of their Black male students and, in a sense, see each of their students as individuals, created opportunities for these teachers to

advocate for Black males, particularly when their students encountered structural impediments within the school. One example involved multiple teachers from this study writing letters of support to school administration and speaking out on behalf of a particular Black male student accused of school infractions. In other cases, teachers directly confronted racialized school processes such as school discipline. As noted in section 4.1, Ms. Langford showed concern over the claims by her students of racist teachers as well as her own observations of teachers' discipline of Black male students. She described how she confronted one of her colleagues:

And so one time, it actually did come up, and I said, "You know, gosh, have you noticed in your class, I'm just curious, in your class, I've noticed that most of the kids, and I only noticed because I have them too, but you know a lot of African American males getting sent out of your class, you know?" And she said, "No, it never really dawned on me" kind of a thing. And so I think maybe little things like that we can check each other on. I mean, I would want someone to check me on that if I wasn't seeing that or if it was, hmm, maybe there is a reason there.

In a similar fashion, Ms. Westin confronted her colleague, who relied on discipline records as an indicator of how the student would act in class:

I told this other teacher, I was like, "You got to just let it go because I don't think that something like that should affect how you view a student in the classroom." I know I have teachers in my department all the time; they see the threes and the fours [discipline codes] on kids, and they automatically think that they're going to be bad, but those kids end up being some of the best kids.

Teachers can be important allies for Black males, particularly when teachers are able to suspend judgment and enact their own agency in contesting processes of racial reproduction in

schools. While the actions of these few teachers will not completely deconstruct the hegemonic nature of school reproduction for Black males, their resistance provides spaces of hope and transcendence where counter-hegemonic possibilities are revealed (Giroux, 1983a).

4.3.3 Challenging student resistance. In addition to their advocacy, the teachers found it important to challenge student acts of resistance they perceived to be self-defeating and detrimental to school success. Although the behaviors of Black males are often misinterpreted within the school, not all Black boys are innocent, and many are complicit in their own school outcomes. As is seen in other studies (Fordham, 1996; Willis, 1977), Black male students at this school sometimes resisted in ways that jeopardized academic success and the ability to access the power that educational attainment provides. Teachers such as Ms. Davis and Ms. Price observed instances in which Black males used intimidation as a strategy to assert themselves and to gain access to power. *While these were discrepant cases in the present study's teacher data, they do highlight how Black males resist school behavioral norms in ways that might limit academic opportunities (MacLeod, 1987; Solomon, 1992).*

In response to these acts of student resistance, the teachers worked to keep their Black male students accountable for their behavior. Mr. Cox detailed how he responds to his Black male students who attempt to resist in ill-advised ways:

And I think our boys still go through that where they just say, "I'm going to whoop this student's butt, I'm going to do something stupid. I'm going to blow off at the teacher because I want to get kicked out. I want to go to OCS, I want to go home for a few days." You know, I haven't sent a single student to OCS. Close as they go is out that door and stand on the side for a little while. They're not going to get a break. Because if I read their tension, I back down. I try to calm them down. But if I can't, then I send them out

for a while and let them calm down and bring them in and don't say anything to them because I can feel when they're [*air noise*] because it can go there.

In addition to not allowing their students to use on-campus suspensions as a way to resist school, the teachers held high academic standards for their Black males, and in many cases, refused to allow their students to give up. Teachers such as Ms. Westin and Ms. Beech continuously pushed the Black male student participants to take advanced courses that they did not want to take. Ms. Langford talked about challenging her students who seemed to resist academic success:

We have class meetings, and so it's very bottom-line, and I finally just had to say to them, "Are you afraid of being successful? Is it because it doesn't feel comfortable? Because you haven't seen it before, and so it doesn't feel good, or it feels odd or now people have those expectations, and, oh man, you're going to have to live up to them?" And what I find with a lot of the African American males, specifically, is I think that does have a lot to do with it. They haven't experienced that success, and they don't know how to do that. They have the goals, and they want to do things, but sometimes they're outlandish. You know, "I'm going to be an NFL football player, Miss Langford." "Okay, are you on our team?" "No." "Okay, well, let's think about some other choices that we might want to work from."

The degree to which Black males encounter lowered academic expectations, academic tracking, and discipline policies, among others processes, is often mediated through what teachers do or do not do. It is possible these teachers' understanding of the racial barriers for Black men allowed them to suspend judgment to a certain degree and to advocate for their students. Further, despite (or possibly as the result of) drawing upon deficit-based explanations

of Black academic failure, the teachers were motivated to keep their students accountable by contesting certain acts of school resistance and challenging their students academically. To a degree, these acts of agency are examples of how teachers as institutional agents can disrupt school processes that have historically limited Black males and provide necessary opportunities for academic success.

5. Discussion

Teachers act as institutional agents and gatekeepers, thus it is important to investigate teachers' ideologies of and practices with Black male students. It is also important to understand how teachers' ideologies and acts of agency may inform or contradict each other. In the present study, the teachers drew upon both structural and cultural impediments to explain the academic and social outcomes of their Black male students. For the teachers, race and gender intersect in ways that contribute to the structural impediments related to Black male stereotypes, misinterpreted behavioral performances, and disproportionate discipline. However, when discussing the academic achievement of Black males, like many other teachers, they downplay race as a structural impediment in favor of culture and emphasize cultural deficits (Hyland, 2005; Lynn, et al., 2010; Milner IV, 2008b). As in this study, teachers often assume that Black boys do not have the academic interest, parental support, language, or other forms of White middle-class cultural capital needed to experience success in schools.

The structure-agency (e.g. race vs. culture) binary through which the teachers seemingly operate may highlight a dilemma of *where* teachers see structural barriers such as race as opposed to simply *whether* they see such structural barriers. In other words, despite the prevalence of cultural deficit explanations, these teachers are not completely "colorblind" and *do*

see race as a real structural impediment; they just do not see how pervasive race is as a structural barrier and how structure and culture inform each other. Thus, it seems the teachers possess an emerging critical consciousness and political clarity about the structural barriers Black males face (Bartolome, 1994; Freire, 1970). This type of awareness is necessary for critical educators and certainly may have influenced the teachers' own resistance to school processes on behalf of Black males.

The data presented on teacher agency highlighted the ways teachers attempted to suspend their own judgment of their Black male students and learn from their mistakes when their assumptions were evidenced as incorrect. They also advocated for Black males when their students encountered school disciplinary systems or teachers who struggled with their own classroom management strategies. The ways in which teachers advocate for their Black male students is an understudied phenomenon that seems to be critically important in the success of Black boys. Further, in understanding how Black boys may resist schooling in ill-advised ways, the teachers held students accountable for their academic and behavioral performances, employing culturally relevant and restorative approaches to handling Black male resistance.

The agency of the teachers might be considered important acts of resistance or contestations against status quo school processes as they create opportunities for Black boys to succeed. A limitation of this study is that the intentions of the teachers' practices are unclear. Because the teachers seem conscious of racism as a structural barrier for Black males, it is possible that their actions stem from critical consciousness and a desire for social justice (Brown, 2009; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004). However, because the teachers also drew upon popular cultural deficit explanations, it's possible that the teachers' practices emanate from a position of pity. Nevertheless, regardless of intent, their agency and the resulting outcomes are meaningful

and necessary to the larger project of racial and economic justice for Black males. By disrupting school norms and processes, the teachers act as necessary institutional powerbrokers (Brayboy, 2005) who work on behalf of Black boys. Brayboy (2005) argued that institutional powerbrokers and their resistance to school hegemony are necessary to transform schools from institutions of oppression to locations of liberation. Further, as Giroux (1983b) noted, the very act of resistance creates spaces of hope and transcendence by producing instantiations that individuals may continuously reflect and act upon (Freire, 1970). Thus, through their self-reflection and contestation of school processes and practices, the teachers create particular opportunities for their Black males, while also modeling practices that hold the potential to be both counter-hegemonic and emancipatory (Freire, 1970, 1985).

6. Conclusions and Implications

The social reproduction of Black males through school is not a deterministic process. It relies on the accommodation or complicity of individual agents to maintain the status quo of inequalities. Likewise, it is through acts of individual and collective resistance that social reproduction can be disrupted. As part of the larger ecology of factors that influence Black male success, teachers play a critical role in the social trajectories that their students may take. In this study, the exploration of teacher ideology and their agency on behalf of their Black male students present possibilities that can be developed and advanced.

Though the teachers in the present study relied on cultural deficit explanations of their Black male students' educational outcomes, it is encouraging that they were also willing to consider the role race plays in Black male schooling. Their understanding of race as a structural barrier must be built upon. Teacher preparation programs should continue to prioritize preparing

a predominantly White middle-class teaching force for work with culturally diverse populations, including Black males (Ladson-Billings, 2000). This might involve challenging preservice teachers' conceptions and ideologies related to race, culture, and systems of stratification. It was clear in the present study how pervasive deficit discourses about Black boys are, even among teachers exhibiting racial consciousness. Thus, it seems necessary to challenge deficit discourses by asking teachers to question why particular forms of capital are privileged over others, and how the cultural capital of Black communities might be used to improve schooling outcomes for Black males (Yosso, 2006). It is also important to counter deficit discourses with anti-deficit approaches to thinking about and understanding Black males. In particular, teacher education coursework might examine individual, community, and institutional factors contributing to Black male successes (Harper, 2012; Hrabowski III, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wilson, Douglas, & Nganga, 2013). This might include highlighting Black male resilience, Black parental involvement practices, and school policies and practices that can improve educational outcomes for Black boys (Author, 2013; Casella, 2003; Gayles, 2005; Harper, 2008; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Milner IV, 2007).

The agency of the teachers in this study should also be considered, as they exemplify subtle acts of subversion that create opportunities for Black male students. In particular, the notion of advocating for Black males seems critically important for teachers to consider. Similar to the actions of the teachers in this study, other educators might find ways to confront individual and systemic practices that lead to poor schooling outcomes for Black males. This would require teachers to examine issues such as Black male disproportionality in school discipline or racialized academic tracking systems. Teacher preparation programs are ideal locations in which future teachers can critically examine systems of stratification and their own role in the

disruption or maintenance of social inequalities. In doing so, teachers might learn to see themselves as agents of change as opposed to apolitical technocrats (Freire, 1987; Giroux, 1988).

Future examinations of teacher ideologies and agency should continue to examine the degree of intentionality of teachers' practices with their Black male students. In particular, research should examine how teachers engage in advocacy and activism for Black males and the intentions of such action. Finally, considering how these teachers drew upon both structural and cultural impediments while still engaging in culturally relevant practices, it is worth contemplating to what degree of critical consciousness teachers need to achieve in order to resist school hegemony and improve the academic opportunities for Black males. It is possible that the degree of critical consciousness achieved by teachers might be related to the question of teacher intentionality.

Table 1*Descriptors of Teachers*

Teacher Alias	Race	Subject	Years Taught at Central High
Ms. Beech	White	Science	3
Mr. Cox	Black	Social Studies	5
Ms. Davis	Black	English	4
Ms. Langford	White	English	8
Ms. Price	Black	Math/Computer Technology	8
Ms. Westin	White	Art	8

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ⁱ The names of the school and participants are pseudonyms. Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

ⁱⁱ Student demographic data collected from school documents. Citation withheld to maintain school confidentiality.