

EDUCATION NO LONGER DEFERRED: THE POSSIBILITIES OF EDUCATING
URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN A SINGLE-GENDER SCHOOL

A Dissertation

by

MARLON CONTRELL JAMES

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Education No Longer Deferred: The Possibilities of Educating Urban African American

Males in a Single-Gender School. (December 2008)

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the emerging school culture of Excel Academy for Boys [Pseudonym] located in the Southwestern region of the United States, and how it contributes to the social and academic development of urban African American male students. This case study was based on interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, students, and the school administrator. Additionally, the researcher conducted participant observations of school meetings, new parent orientations, new teacher interviews, and reviewed student academic and behavioral records. This exploratory analysis consisted of two separate; but interrelated, qualitative studies relevant to educating urban African American males.

The first inquiry featured a case study of Excel Academy for Boys, a single-gender middle school serving urban African American males. This detailed examination of Excel Academy's *organizational habitus* yielded the *Building African American Males Model*. This organizational process was characterized by four essential factors that included: (1) educational justice; (2) expectations monitoring; (3) expectations

casting; and (4) a culture of Effort. Particular attention was given to how each factor promoted *community-school synergy* or *organizational synergy*. These processes were essential for creating a school culture and climate that promoted the emotional, social, and academic maturation of students. Implications for protecting and strengthening the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy were offered and broader implications for the emerging African American males' school movement were discussed.

The second study of Excel Academy uncovered four complexities that teachers, parents, and the school leader encountered as they sought to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of urban African American males. These four critical complexities emerged through observations of the educational processes at Excel Academy, and were labeled: 1) expectations dissonance; 2) disguised engagement; 3) differential engagement, and 4) expectations overload. The emergence of each factor was detailed, and recommendations were offered to address each complexity.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is first and foremost an exercise of my faith in God, through Him I believe that all is possible. I would like to dedicate this effort to my three wonderful children, Micah, Alex, and Mya James, I have toiled for your benefit as you will for your children. To my beautiful wife Kerri, I thank you for your love and support, your smiles and encouragement since we first met. Finally, to my dear mother Lucille, I would not have had the courage to pursue a doctorate if not for your example, your prayers and love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the faculty, graduate students, and the school administrators in the College of Education, and especially in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Culture for their training and support. I am grateful to each of you for creating an experience for me that I will never forget. Also, to the many graduate students, I thank you for your pulls and pushes as we struggled with knowledge together. It is my prayer that over the years we will work together to make real the many ideas that we fashioned at Texas A&M University. To my committee, Dr. Lewis, Dr. Carter, Dr. Webb-Johnson, and Dr. Hill-Jackson - each of you have touched and encouraged me, and, above all challenged me to strive toward excellence. So, whatever I am perceived to be today, it is because of your investment. Finally, to the school administrator, teachers, parents, and students of Excel Academy for Boys, I thank you for your participation in this study and for trusting me to tell your story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION: HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A PROBLEM?	1
Theoretical Framework: Problem-centered Education	2
An Alternative Explanation: Triple Jeopardy.....	4
Ideological Jeopardy	6
Institutional Jeopardy	7
Educational and Legal Interchange	7
Educational and Economic Interchange.....	11
Individual Jeopardy.....	13
Project Overview and Guiding Research Questions	14
Definition of Key Terms	15
II EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF A SINGLE-GENDER SCHOOL FOR URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES.....	18
Introduction	18
Theoretical Framework	21
Problem-centered Education	21
Single-gender Schools.....	21
Organizational Habitus and Urban School Reform.....	22
Conceptual Framework	23
Methodology	24
Methodological Rational	24
Researcher's Lens	24
Researcher Questions	26
Research Methods	27
Data Collection.....	29

CHAPTER	Page
Data Analysis	30
The School.....	31
The Students.....	32
The Participants.....	33
Findings.....	33
Educational Justice.....	34
Community-school Synergy.....	35
Community Sentiment.....	37
Expectations Monitoring.....	39
Expectations Monitoring and Hiring Practices	40
Organizational Synergy.....	41
Expectations Casting.....	42
Communicating Expectations	43
Assessing Expectations	44
Expectations Synergy.....	44
Trusting Community-school Partnership	45
A Culture of Effort	47
Discussion	50
Building African American Males Model.....	51
Implications.....	52
Sustaining an Effective Organizational Habitus	52
The African American Males’ School Movement.....	53
Conclusion.....	55
III NEVER QUIT: THE COMPLEXITIES OF PROMOTING SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AT A SINGLE-GENDER SCHOOL FOR URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES	56
Introduction	56
Theoretical Framework	57
Resilience Theory and the “Risk” Tradition	59
Overview of Resilience Theory.....	59
Education Resilience	60
African American and Educational Resiliency Research	61
Critical Race Theory: Critique of Resiliency.....	63
Critical Race Theory	63
Critical Race Critique.....	64
Power-centered Research	68
Relation to Current Study.....	69
Methodology	69
Methodological Rational	69

CHAPTER	Page
Research Questions	70
Researcher's Lens	70
The School.....	71
The Students.....	73
The Participants.....	73
Methods.....	74
Data Collection.....	74
Data Analysis	76
Findings.....	77
Promoting Excellence	77
Social Excellence	78
Academic Excellence	80
Complexities Promoting Excellence	82
Expectations Dissonance.....	82
Disguised Engagement.....	84
Differential Engagement	85
Expectations Overload	88
Discussion	93
Recommendations	94
Expectations Dissonance.....	95
Disguised Engagement.....	96
Differential Engagement	96
Expectations Overload	97
Conclusion	98
 IV CONCLUSION: PROBLEMS AND CONTRADICTIONS	 100
Common Themes	100
Implications.....	102
 REFERENCES.....	 104
 APPENDIX A	 114
 APPENDIX B	 115
 APPENDIX C	 116
 VITA	 117

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		Page
1	Triple Jeopardy Theory	114
2	Building African American Males Model.....	115
3	The Imara Cycle	116

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A PROBLEM?

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois penned a historic and prophetic essay entitled *Of Our Spiritual Strivings*; in this work he delved into the spiritual state of African Americans. His insightful essay spoke to the contradictory existence of being both African and American in a society resisting the melding of the two. Today, his insights still ring true when considering the following passage:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it...., How does it feel to be a problem? (p. 1).

In his day, African Americans were considered as a *problem people*, beset by both natural and cultural imperfections, rendering them unfit for full membership in a progressive society (Aguirre & Turner, 2004; Mckee, 1993). In this present era, this image has not given way in a more egalitarian America; rather, it continues to form a *problem-paradigm* that limits the quality of life and opportunity for African Americans in modern American society.

This dissertation follows the style of *Urban Education*.

Furthermore, within the context of American education this jaded view of African Americans yields a praxis referred to in this work as *problem-centered education*. This long standing system of beliefs and practice is arguably responsible for more than a century of educational policies, practices, and programs that have failed to meet the needs of African American learners, particularly African American males in urban schools (Kunjufu, 2007; Noguera, 2008).

This introductory chapter has three aims: (1) to build a theoretical framework exposing the social-historical existence of *problem-centered education*; (2) to offer an alternative explanation for understanding the educational struggles of urban African American males that counters *problem-centered* rationales; and (3) to provide guiding research questions for two subsequent qualitative studies on educating urban African American males in single gender schools that will follow this chapter.

Theoretical Framework: Problem-centered Education

Supporting the existence of *problem-centered education* in modern American education, Lewis, James, Hancock and Hill-Jackson (2008) emphasized the longstanding nature of American ideologies suggesting that African Americans' culture, children, and communities are intellectually, socially, and morally inferior to White Americans. Furthermore, these ideologies are often put into practice in schools animating the quality of teaching, leadership, and learning. In this light, *problem-centered education* is a social-historical reality rather than an individual phenomenon; as such, it can be characterized by the following six tendencies in American Education:

- (1) Philosophies supporting the notion that African American children, culture, and communities are inherently pathological (Feagin, 2006; Mckee, 1993);
- (2) Examining African American educational experiences through Eurocentric standards, philosophies, concepts, theories and research methodologies (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000);
- (3) Crafting educational policies, programs, and other measures designed to promote African American student achievement through these pathological and Eurocentric frameworks (Lewis et al., 2008);
- (4) The educational practice of labeling African American students as “at risk”, and African American communities and cultures as the risk factors that must be circumvented in order to achieve academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003);
- (5) Creating school cultures characterized by low teacher expectations, a low sense of responsibility for student learning, and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy (Anyon, 1997; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006);
- (6) The practice of dismissing the professional responsibility of educators and the greater society for creating and sustaining educational disparities, while “blaming the victims” of educational discrimination (Ford, 1996; Lewis et al., 2008).

This unbroken chain of American thought and practice is systemic in nature, because it is equally present and operative in other major social institutions including, (a) local, state and national governments; (b) county, state and federal legal systems; (c) the mass media; (d) religious doctrines and practices; (e) economic institutions; (f) the military; and (g) the American family (Aguirre & Turner, 2004; Feagin & Feagin, 2003). Moreover, articulating and redressing the effects of *problem-centered education* requires a sociological perspective that clarifies how these major social institutions contribute to the inability of schools to educate urban African American males. The next section begins such an effort by considering the detrimental impact of *problem-based* ideologies, institutions and individuals on the educational, economic and legal experiences of urban African American males.

An Alternative Explanation: Triple Jeopardy

If African Americans in general are viewed as an educational problem, then African American males are likely seen as a collective catastrophe. In fact, current research can now quantify the existence of a potential sapping cycle that pushes far too many urban African American males from poor families to poor failing urban schools to jails to unemployment lines, and back to jails (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Mincy, 2006; Urban League, 2007). Given this situation, it is essential that social and educational researchers dismantle the *problem paradigm* that contributes to African American males' disfranchisement in the larger society, and *problem-centered education* that compromises their educational experiences. Any effort to do so must begin by addressing the following question: If pathological children, cultures or communities are not the direct causes of urban African American males' educational struggles, then what factors offer an alternative explanation? This inquiry requires a synthesis of current research on the state of urban African American males.

To begin, African American underperformance is typically linked with exposure to "risk factors" such as poverty, the lack of parental involvement, unstable family lives, home and peer cultures that discourage academic pursuits, and violent communities (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Richards & Martinez, 1993; Werner, Bierman, & French, 1971; Werner & Smith, 1977). These explanations have been critiqued due to the deficit models that inform them, which exemplify *problem-centered education* (Howard & Johnson, 2000; Lewis & Hill-Jackson, 2007; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Waxman & Huang, 1996). The present work presents a

progressive approach for explaining the educational struggles of African American urban males that is sensitive to how race based discrimination diminishes their educational opportunities.

Triple Jeopardy Theory (TJT) is informed by the “permanence of race” lens from critical race theory (Bell, 1998; Lawrence, 1992), and racial stratification theories (Aguirre & Turner, 2004; Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Mckee, 1993). Illustrated in Figure 1, TJT asserts that the educational disparities between urban African American males and other social groups are created and sustained by a web of integrated social forces (i.e., unaddressed high rates of dropouts, unequal suspensions, disproportionate legal referrals in schools, low teacher expectations and efficacy, school cultures that reinforce *problem-centered* philosophies among school personnel, and high rates of unemployment and legal discrimination) that work together to constrain the educational opportunity of African American males (Aguirre & Turner, 2004).

Triple Jeopardy theory specifically asserts that the racial hierarchical structure of American society generates three interconnected levels of *jeopardy* for African American males in urban America, (1) ideological jeopardy; (2) institutional jeopardy; and (3) individual jeopardy. In sum, *ideological jeopardy* is the systemic philosophy that African American males are socially, culturally, and genetically inferior, thus unfit for full inclusion into American society (Lewis et al., 2008). When this *problem-paradigm* is actualized within the major social institutions of American society it facilitates and justifies mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination referred to here as *institutional jeopardy*. This form of jeopardy will be explained further by examining

how discrimination within the educational, economic and legal systems of America integrate to create a *poor house to poor school house to jail house to poor house* vicious cycle among urban African American males (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Edelman, 2007).

Finally, agents within these institutions (e.g., teachers in schools) create *individual jeopardy* if their actions are informed by *problem-paradigms* as they discipline students, set expectations, interact with parents, and select teaching/curricular materials and methods that result in unwelcoming classrooms and school environments for urban African American males (Lewis et al., 2008). The following subsections will further explain each form of *Jeopardy* with supporting literature on urban African American males.

Ideological Jeopardy

Figure 1 illustrates *ideological jeopardy*, a mode of thought evident throughout American history that attempts to define the nature of African American male learners through racist lenses. These dehumanizing epistemologies generate and perpetuate notions of inferior moral character, work ethic, culture and intellectual ability among African American males (Mckee, 1993). This represents a society-wide attack against African American males, and has been labeled *deficit thinking* in the context of American education (Carter, 2003).

Researchers Skrla and Scheurich (2001) and Valencia (1997) note that *deficit thinking* is the governing epistemology that informs the quality of education and educational leadership for many poor and racial minority children in America.

Furthermore, Rushing (2001) concluded that “American education is not a neutral institution, but one that functions in the context of political, cultural, and social inequalities and plays a role in maintaining and legitimating those inequalities” (p. 32). Therefore, educational institutions operating from *deficit ideologies* are functioning in harmony with economic and legal systems, privileging students who are members of valued social groups, while jeopardizing the futures of urban African American males.

Institutional Jeopardy

The second form of *Jeopardy* shown in Figure 1 is *Institutional Jeopardy*. Social institutions (legal, economic, and educational systems) are structures that transform ideologies into practices, policies and processes that restrict educational access, quality and opportunity for urban African American males (Lewis et. al, 2008). This interaction between ideology and institutional policies and practices makes it is inappropriate to consider the legal, educational, and economic jeopardy confronting urban African American males as separate and unrelated phenomena. To further clarify, two examples of *institutional jeopardy* will be developed here, (1) the interchange between *educational and legal systems*; and (2) the interchange between the *educational and economic systems*.

Educational and legal interchange

The Children’s Defense Fund (2007) and Edelman (2007) refer to the effects of *educational and legal Interchanges* as the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” and the “school house to jail house pipeline”, respectively. It is important to note that while all racial

and gender groups are represented within this “pipeline” African American males born in 2001 had a 1 in 3 chance of imprisonment in their lifetime. Sadly, there are four major educational practices that create entry points into the “school house to jail house pipeline” for African American males in urban educational settings.

The first entrance point is caused by the misapplication of “zero tolerance” policies by many school districts in their efforts to control school violence. These practices have tripled the number of students arrested in schools across the nation since 1999 with African males being disproportionately represented in school arrests (Edelman, 2007). To illustrate, in 1999 approximately 5,308 African Americans were arrested nationwide in schools, but by 2004 that number swelled to 13,077 with a staggering 10,200 African American males being arrested (Edelman, 2007). These numbers are drastic underestimates of the problem, because there is no uniform way for all districts to report school arrests to the government. Interestingly enough, most African American males do not have to be arrested in schools; rather, school districts routinely refer thousands of students to the juvenile court systems each year.

Consequently, the second entry point into the “the school house to jail house pipeline” is the increased practice of referring African American males into the criminal justice system by schools. For instance, a recent study sponsored by the Florida NAACP illustrates this trend throughout school districts in Florida. The report notes that statewide during the 2004-2005 academic year 26,990 students were referred to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (FDJJ)(NAACP, 2006). In this school year, 12,415 African Americans were referred to FDJJ, a figure that represented 46% of all

referrals. The problem becomes more evident when considering that African Americans were only 21% of all students in Florida. Equally troubling is that 9,311 African American males were referred in the 2004-2005 school year, which represented 35% of all referrals by a subpopulation that constituted less than 11% of students in the state.

Moreover, according to this NAACP report:

Over three-quarters of school-based referrals (76 percent) were for misdemeanor offenses such as disorderly conduct, trespassing, or assault and/or battery, which is usually nothing more than a schoolyard fight (p. 6).

This type of student misconduct was handled by schools and parents before the implementation of “zero tolerance policies”, but is now being outsourced to the Justice System in record numbers, disproportionately jeopardizing the educational futures of urban African American males (Edelman, 2007).

A third related entry point to the prison pipeline is articulated by Costenbader and Markson (1994) research based on district level suspensions from ten states. Their results indicate that urban African American males were suspended at higher rates compared to all other student groups (more than 3 times as much in some districts). More recently, Krezmien (2006) concluded that Maryland’s high suspension rate can be attributed to the disproportionate suspension of African American students in large urban and poor school districts.

Additionally, a study by the Florida NAACP (2006) found that for the same offenses in Palm Beach district elementary schools, African American students were seven times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions compared to White students. In the Hillsborough district, African Americans represent only 21.3% of

elementary school children but constitute 59.3% of out-of-school suspensions. Also, in Pinellas school district, African Americans represent only 19% of all students but received an alarming 45.5% of all out-of-school suspensions.

The root cause of disparities such as these was further explained Jung and Poole (2006) who concluded that the average 3 to 1 ratio of African Americans suspended compared to White students nationally cannot be explained by differences in social class, school characteristics (violent schools vs. safe schools), nor students' reported behavioral problems. In other words, African American are not suspended more because of how they behave, being poor or well-to-do, or problems associated with schooling in urban vs. suburban communities. The only factor that remained significantly linked to the disproportionate suspension of African Americans is their race, and for African American males their gender and race (Jung & Poole, 2006).

The final entry point into the pipeline is the high rates of dropouts among urban African American males, which have been directly related to school suspensions and arrests (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Noguera & Wing, 2006). had been suspended at some point in their educational career. This supports the notion Specifically, Costenbader and Markson (1994) reported that 51-55% of school dropouts that the criminalizing of education over the last five years has disproportionately pushed African American students from academic trajectories to paths leading to prison.

In fact, the Justice Policy Institute (2003) notes that 50% of African American male dropouts had prison records by age thirty, while only 10% of White male dropouts reported having prison records by age thirty. Undoubtedly, "the cradle to prison

pipeline” major entry points emanate from the systemic failure of urban schools. This *educational and legal Interchange* is just one example of *institutional jeopardy* resulting from racial discrimination operative between educational institutions and the criminal justice system.

Educational and economic interchange

A second form of *Institutional Jeopardy* is associated with the economic condition of African American males in urban areas who dropped out of school, and those who graduated from urban high schools but did not pursue a higher education. Mincy, Lewis and & Tan (2006) detailed the harsh economic realities of urban African American male high school graduates with no college coursework, and concluded that 46% of them reported no income in 2001. Furthermore, 82.9% of these African American males reported making less than the median wage of all other male workers with similar educational backgrounds, and within the same age groupings.

A similar report by Holzer and Offner (2006) concluded that urban African American males with no collegiate education reported higher unemployment rates than other similarly educated men from 1929 through 2001. This pattern of higher unemployment among high school educated African American urban males is most closely related to the decreasing availability of blue collar and manufacturing jobs in America (Holzer & Offner, 2006). The decrease in blue collar jobs typically available to males without a college education is further compounded by the continued shift to an economy based on White collar and service sector jobs that require a college degree or at least some college.

Also, consider that during the economic downturns in the 1980's - 1990's African American males were the last hired and the first fired, resulting in double the unemployment rate when compared to similarly educated White males living in urban America. Finally, Holzer and Offner (2006) also reported that the increased imprisonment among African American male youth during the decade of the 1990's also contributed to higher rates of unemployment. In this changing economy, urban African American male high school graduates and dropouts are being left behind. Just receiving a high school education no longer provides economic or social stability for urban African American males (Holzer & Offner, 2006).

The complexity of *institutional jeopardy* necessitates a brief summary of its key elements. It results when *problem-paradigms* are actualized within the major social institutions of America, such as educational, economic and legal institutions. School practices create key entry points into the “school house to jail house pipeline”, which include the overrepresentation of urban African American males among high school dropouts, suspensions, referrals to juvenile courts, and school arrests. Also, African American males who do not obtain a college education are disproportionately poor, imprisoned, unemployed, and underpaid when compared to other similarly educated urban males. Overall, complex interchanges between practices common in the educational, economic and legal systems of America characterize *institutional jeopardy*.

Individual Jeopardy

The final element of *triple jeopardy* is individual in nature or so it appears. *Individual jeopardy*, is a byproduct of educators' conformity to the tenets of *problem-centered education*, and the normalization of this praxis in school cultures (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Lewis et al., 2008). Simply stated, *individual jeopardy* is caused by teachers, counselors and administrators adopting and acting upon the *problem-paradigm* institutionalized within school cultures, policies, and practices. This was confirmed by researchers Ogawa, Crain, Loomis, and Ball (2008) who note that organizational and school cultures once established inform the values and practices of individual educators.

This perspective yields the insight that *individual jeopardy* is not simply an individual teacher acting upon personal biases. Rather, it is an expected even accepted mode of operation in schools. School cultures such as these often normalize the poor instruction, unfair discipline and general disregard for African American males in urban schools, to the point that the collective indifference of educators becomes invisible (Ogawa et al., 2008). Teachers, counselors, and administrators take part in jeopardizing the life chances of urban African American males through these seemingly invisible practices and processes. The results of *individual jeopardy* can be measured by researchers (i.e., disproportioned representation of African American males in suspension, referrals, and arrests), but these discriminatory practices often go unquestioned within the context of many schools because they are part of a normalized

collect habit (Diamond et al., 2004). It is these daily practices, and philosophies that inform them that must be exposed to redress the effects of *individual jeopardy*.

Project Overview and Guiding Research Questions

Addressing the harmful effects of *triple jeopardy* is a matter of social justice, yet American society is resistant to the radical social change that is needed to dissolve it. Therefore, transforming classrooms, schools, and districts is a more tangible goal that the average educator can take part in. This effort can be strengthened by developing a framework of *educational justice*, designed to address the role that educators and schools play in sustaining *triple jeopardy*, and uncover ways to decouple school philosophies, practices, and cultures from *problem-center education*.

The present effort to deconstruct this troubling praxis, and redress its harmful effects consisted of two separate but interrelated qualitative studies relevant to educating urban African American males. The first study in chapter II explored the following guiding question: How did the praxis of *education justice* inform the school culture of a single-gender middle school for urban African American males? This study began by developing the idea of *educational justice* and discussing its potential as an alternative praxis to *problem-centered education*. Next a case based on qualitative fieldwork exploring the school culture of a middle school designed to meet the needs of urban African American males was presented.

Next, chapter III will entertain the guiding questions: How can critical race theory expose the *problem-centered* nature of resiliency research, and how can a single-gender middle school designed to meet the needs of urban African American males

provide insights into a *power-centered* approach to education? This study began with a brief review and critique of the “risk tradition” in educational resiliency research. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of the school culture and the four complexities that emerged in a single-gender school for African American males. Subsequent to these chapters is a concluding chapter that reviewed common findings.

Definitions of Key Terms

Educational Justice – is a praxis designed to address the role that educators and schools play in sustaining triple jeopardy, and uncover ways to decouple school philosophies, practices, and cultures from problem-center education

Ideological Jeopardy is the systemic philosophy that African American males are socially, culturally, and genetically inferior, thus unfit for full for equal education.

Individual Jeopardy - is caused by teachers, counselors and administrators adopting and acting upon the problem-paradigms institutionalized within school cultures, policies, and practices.

Institutional Jeopardy - When this *problem-paradigm* is actualized within the major social institutions of American society it facilitates and justifies mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination within this institutions including the educational system.

Problem-centered Education - is a systemic manifestation of the problem paradigm within the context of American Education. Like the problem paradigm in the larger society, problem centered education compromises the quality of education that African Americans receive and limits the effectiveness of educational reform efforts.

Problem Paradigm – this set of ideas view African Americans as beset by both natural and cultural imperfections, rendering them unfit for full membership in a progressive society. This set of philosophies also compromises the quality of life and opportunity for African Americans in modern American society

Triple Jeopardy Theory – is a sociological explanation for the systemic underperformance of African American males in education. Specifically asserts that the racial hierarchical structure of American society generates three interconnected levels of *jeopardy* for African American males in urban America, (1) ideological jeopardy; (2) institutional jeopardy; and (3) individual jeopardy.

Community-School Synergy - the combined expectations and efforts of families, the local community, and Excel Academy.

Community Sentiment – shared feelings and a sense of trust for Excel Academy.

Culture of Effort – organizationally shared effort and sense of responsibility for student social and academic development.

Educational Justice - the belief and practice of providing the highest quality education to students who were typically denied such by the larger educational system.

Expectations Casting – is the process by which social and academic expectations were transferred among different social groups (teachers, students, parents), and how this process transformed the quality of education the students at Excel received.

Expectations Monitoring – is an organizational commitment to securing, training, and challenging high expecting teachers, which contributed to the alignment of expectations among teachers, the school administrator and students at Excel.

Organizational Habitus – describes the culture of a school as consisting of shared expectations and effort put forth to promote student learning, which is effected by the race and social class composition of the student body.

Organizational Synergy - shared expectations and efforts of teachers and the school administrator of Excel Academy.

Single-gender Schools – entire schools designed specifically for one sex of students.

Expectations Dissonance – the social expectations of teachers fluctuating for different groups of students, while their academic expectations remained constant.

Differential Engagement – is characterized by academic engagement but social disengagement among students who are not being challenged with a culturally relevant or academically stimulating curriculum.

Disguised Engagement - is characterized by: (1) social engagement to avoid teacher's attention; (2) social disengagement when not directly supervised by teachers; and (3) incomplete class work.

Expectations Overload – a pattern of quitting observed among some students brought on by the radical changes in normative school systems. This temporary state may be caused by students being exposed to high social and academic expectations by teachers, parents and their peers for the first time in their lives.

Imara – an eight value that emerged at Excel Academy that is Swahili for the power to persevere.

Power-centered Research – research based upon the view that African Americans have demonstrated power in their efforts to overcome the social forces that oppose their matriculation in society.

CHAPTER II
EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF
A SINGLE-GENDER SCHOOL FOR URBAN
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

This article featured a case study of Excel Academy for Boys, a single-gender middle school serving urban African American males. The present case study was based on a participant observation, interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, students and the school administrator of Excel Academy. A detailed examination of the establishment of Excel's *organizational habitus* yielded the *Building African American Males Model*. This organizational process was characterized by four essential factors that included: (1) Educational justice; (2) Expectations monitoring; (3) Expectations casting; and (4) A culture of Effort. Particular attention was given to how each factor promoted *community-school* or *organizational synergy*, which created an environment that promoted the emotional, social, and academic maturation of students. Implications for protecting and strengthening the organizational habitus of Excel Academy were offered, and broader implications for the emerging African American males' school movement were discussed.

Introduction

...the sincere and passionate belief that somewhere between men and cattle, God created a *tertium quid* [neither man nor cattle], and called it a Negro, -- a clownish, simple creature, at times even lovable within its limitations, but strictly foreordained to walk within the Veil... -- some of them with favoring chance might become men, but in sheer self-defense

we dare not let them, and we build about them walls so high, and hang between them and the light a veil so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903).

Over a century ago, Du Bois, a celebrated African American scholar, provided a commentary of the repressive public sentiment regarding the humanity and social position of African Americans. Not a man nor an animal, but a third creation all together. Members of a democratic society, yet second class citizens by destiny and discrimination. In short, African Americans were perceived as an irreconcilable problem in a progressive democracy.

Du Bois further theorized that this broader *problem-centered* philosophy and practice gave rise to a shared-belief concerning how to educate African Americans:

We daily hear that an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black
(p. 66).

The view that African Americans were inferior, even in the sight of God provided the impetus for their oppression in the sphere of education. During this time, it was seen as a dangerous pursuit to educate this *tertium quid* to aspire beyond the “veil,” and efforts to do so would promote a delusional belief in their right to equality.

It is plausible to suggest that this *problem-paradigm* and its influence on efforts to educate African American males continue to persist. Today, vast teacher quality and funding inequities still persist within American K-12 educational settings giving rise to academic disparities between African Americans and White Americans, particularly in urban schools (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). More specifically,

African American males in urban communities and schools are being left behind all other social groups according to most educational measures, and a host of related social indicators (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Kozol, 2005; Mincy, 2006; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Urban League, 2007). This daunting set of obstacles must be circumvented in order to increase the quality of education that urban African American males receive.

Toward this goal, the present case study explored Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym), a new middle school designed to meet the behavioral, emotional, and academic needs of urban African American males in the Southwestern region of the United States. First, this study will develop the *problem-centered education* framework that provided the theoretical context for this study. Second, this study briefly reviews recent changes to Title IX legislation (gender equality in educational programs), which has promoted an emerging African American males' schools movement to address the educational needs of urban African American males. Third, the study addressed the importance of *organizational habitus* (i.e., shared expectations and effort) to successful urban school reforms. Fourth, this work will present an exploratory qualitative case study of Excel Academy for Boys. Toward the goal of understand the complex nature of *organizational habitus* at this school. Finally, specific implications for the continued enhancement of Excel Academy's *organizational habitus* are offered; followed by critical implications for the emerging African American males' schools movement.

Theoretical Framework

Problem-centered Education

The *problem-paradigm* operative within American educational systems yields *Problem-centered education*, which creates, sustains and justifies educational inequalities among urban African American male learners. This integrated system of social-historical philosophies and practices can be illustrated by the following six themes:

- (1) Philosophies constructing African Americans as inherently pathological (Feagin, 2006; Mckee, 1993);
- (2) The practice of imposing Eurocentric education and research upon African Americans (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000);
- (3) The practice of attempting to promote African American student achievement through pathological and Eurocentric frameworks (Lewis et al., 2008);
- (4) Educational research that labels African American students with “risk” labels, and views their cultures as impediments to academic success (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003);
- (5) Creating school cultures that are not responsive to African American students’ cultures, teachers with low expectations, and low commitment to student learning (Anyon, 1997; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006);
- (6) The practice of “blaming the victims” of educational discrimination as a method for dismissing the professional responsibility of educators and the greater society for creating and sustaining educational disparities (Ford, 1996; Lewis et al, 2008).

Single-gender Schools

The latest educational intervention heralded by many as a cure for the educational challenges confronting urban African American males are single-gender schools. The opening of these schools were made possible through changes to the *No*

Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2006 that relaxed standards set forth in Title IX, which protects against gender discrimination (Office for Civil Rights, 2006, US Department of Education, 2006). Since the introduction of these new regulations, the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE) notes that the use of single-gender schools and classrooms are increasing as districts seek more effective ways to address the educational challenges facing each sex (NASSPE, 2008). As of 2007, the NASSPE estimates that 88 single-gender schools have emerged across the nation, but more than 330 schools at least offer single-gender classrooms. Yet, only 16 schools are considered all male schools, which do not include several newly opened schools during the 2007-2008 academic year designed to serve African American male learners (NASSPE, 2008). Regrettably, this movement to single-gendered schools to meet the needs of in urban African American males has yet to be visited in a meaningful way by social or educational researchers.

Organizational Habitus and Urban School Reform

Despite the enthusiasm about the potential of African American males' schools, a cautionary note on school culture is required. Researchers have consistently found that educational reforms have been compromised due to school cultures characterized by: (1) teachers with low expectations; (2) teachers with a low sense of efficacy; (3) teachers' beliefs that counter new reform ideas; (4) lack of teacher's knowledge in content areas; and (5) school administration that does not support reform efforts (Bray, 2007; Leggett, 2007; Lipman, 1998; Muncy & McQuillan, 1996; Senge, 1990; Smith, 2007).

These trends indicate the need for exploring the organizational context of new single-gender schools serving African American males. This includes teacher expectations within the context of these single-gender schools, because teacher expectations studies since Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) tend to focus on the impact of low teacher expectations on students within a localized teacher-student relationship. More contemporary research on teacher expectations (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Warren, 2002) considers the importance of school context (urban or suburban), but still emphasizes the individualized nature of teacher expectations.

Conceptual Framework

For this study it was more appropriate to focus on how the school culture animated the shared expectations and effort of educators at Excel Academy for Boys, instead of focusing on individual teacher's expectations and efforts. Supportively, Diamond et al. (2004) theorized that *organizational habitus* or the race and social-class based "dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations" of teachers and administrators create a shared school culture (p. 76). Their study concluded that the *organizational habitus* of schools serving poor African American students facilitated low academic expectations, and a diminished sense of responsibility and effort for helping students learn among teachers. In these school environments, "waves of sentiment" among administrators, counselors and teachers make low expectations and low teacher effort acceptable, even expected behavior (p. 76). The emerging African American males' schools movement may offer a viable alternative to traditional public schools for urban African American males, but these schools must carefully create and maintain an

organizational habitus that yields high teacher expectations and effort. The following exploratory case study of Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym) detailed their efforts to create an *organizational habitus* that promotes the behavioral, emotional, and social maturation of urban African American males.

Methodology

Methodological Rational

The decision to employ qualitative methodology in this study was influenced by the exploratory nature of this inquiry, and a deep personal commitment to deconstruct the racist images and deficit centered educational practices that compromise research on urban African American males. Furthermore, based upon Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) overview of qualitative research, I found that this methodology and its host of research methods provided a useful framework that enabled me to: (1) locate myself as an African American male researcher in the research moment of Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym); (2) describe and interpret the educational processes at Excel Academy within their "natural setting"; (3) understand Excel Academy through the experiences of students, teachers, the school leader and parents; and (4) to provide voice to their varied experiences and efforts within a particular educational space (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3-4).

Researcher's Lens

When asked to explain how an African American boy born into poverty and a single parent family in urban Chicago matriculated through academia to earn a Ph.D., I

often credit the tireless efforts of my mother (Lucille), and Miss Collins and Miss Simms my fifth and sixth grade teachers, respectively. They not only helped me realize my academic potential; but more importantly, they rescued me from the anger that possessed and threatened to consume me. Alcohol abuse, drug addiction, and violence were common in my home as they are in many American families. Yet, like many urban parents, my mother lacked the resources to help us emotionally cope with these pathologies.

Unfortunately, I expressed the rage that I felt for what I saw in my home in schools, and was labeled a problem child. My academic promise went unnoticed until the fifth grade during which Miss Collins spent time helping me to understand how to properly express my emotions in the context of school. That year, I competed for and was awarded a spot as a school representative at the district level in the Academic Olympics. This success carried over into my sixth grade year where Miss Simms encouraged me to attend a college preparatory high school (Kenwood Academy) and to consider pursuing a college education after high school. Contrary to popular belief, my family life was still very unstable during this turnaround. But with the support of my teachers and my mother, I began to understand that I was intelligent, and that pursuing a college education was within my reach. In short, I believe that my academic success is most directly traced to these two years, and they were both terrible and terrific all at once.

In 2007, I found myself pondering a number of dissertation topics when I came across an internet article featuring a new charter school called Excel Academy for Boys

located in the Southwestern region of the United States. The school was less than a year old, but out of curiosity I decided to visit Excel a week later. Upon my arrival, the School Leader, Mr. Goodson (pseudonym) arranged the customary student lead tour and a classroom visit. I was impressed with the orderly flow classes and the fact that most students seemed to be on task. I stayed for three hours that day and left wondering if what I had seen was the true Excel or simply a mirage. During the ride home, I decided that a case study of Excel would best allow me to understand and describe the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2002).

Research Questions

My experiences as an African American male educated in urban schools sparked a deep commitment within me to research, and work toward transforming urban schools. Yet, I found it difficult to establish research questions at the onset of this study that would enable me to look critically at a school that (at first glance) was attempting to meet the needs of urban African American males. I wanted to be sensitive to the reality that Excel Academy, and its school culture was less than a year old, while not sacrificing the critical lens needed to deconstruct the processes operative at Excel Academy. Toward this goal, the following exploratory research questions emerged following several visits to the school:

1. What factors characterized the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy?
2. How did these factors impact the ability of the community and school to form a synergistic partnership?
3. How did these factors promote synergy within the school organization of Excel Academy?

Research Methods

As an African American male researcher educated in urban America, I wanted to honor the work and commitment of the participating students, teachers, the school leader, and parents throughout the research process, while maintaining a critical and questioning disposition. These aims were best supported by organizing a qualitative case study, with multiple research methods. Yin (2002) notes that it is appropriate to use case studies when: (1) “how” questions need to be explored; (2) to study a phenomenon within its lived context; and (3) when using multiple sources of data to understand a particular case.

Furthermore, Stake (2005) asserts that “the prime referent in case study is the case, not the methods by which the case operates...the object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system” (p. 444-445). The case in this study is therefore Excel Academy, or the various complexities, systems and practices that may be “functional or dysfunctional, rational or irrational” within this school system (p. 444). These “working parts” as described by Stake (2005) are purposeful, thus understanding these processes provided insights into the nature of this particular case. In this study, the “work parts” were conceptualized as Excel’s *organizational habitus*, because school culture informs the quality of teaching and learning, particularly for diverse learners (Diamond et al. 2004). This study attempted to understand what is common and uncommon about the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy from the perspectives of students, parents, teachers, and the school leader.

Furthermore, critical race methodologist Smith-Maddox & Solorzano (2002) and Solorzano & Yosso (2002) detail how both innovative and traditional research methods can be used to give voice to populations marginalized because of racial and gender hegemony. Also, Duncan (2002) and Lynn (2002) provide quality examples of how traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and participant observations can be employed to understand the schooling experiences of African American males, while countering deficit thinking that compromises much of educational research. Additionally, Winddance-Twine & Warren (2000) employed focus groups and participant observations within a racially and culturally sensitive framework as they researched issues and topics linked to race and phenomena common in culturally diverse communities.

In this light, the present study featured student focus groups, parent interviews, teacher interviews, interviews with the school leader, and a participant observation of classes and the daily routines of Excel Academy. More specifically, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gain nuanced descriptions of the school climate, classroom management, insights into teacher and parental academic/social expectations, and the personal journeys that lead teachers to Excel Academy. Focus groups with students were relied upon to gain a shared or collective understanding of Excel Academy from a student's perspective (Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000). Participant observations were used to experience and observe the school environment, student-teacher interaction, the school leader's daily routine, student-student interaction, and teaching strategies within a lived context (Yin, 2002). This extended participant

observation proved essential to gaining insights into emergent themes, contradictions and complexities revealed during the interviews and focus groups.

Stake (2005) discusses the need for case study researchers to consider the accuracy of their descriptions, interpretations, and judgments. According to Stake (2005) *triangulation* is the procedure by which qualitative researchers seek this clarity through the use of multiple data sources and by pursuing the “diversity of perception, even the multiple realities within which people live” (p. 454). This study sought insights into the school culture of Excel Academy from the perspective of parents, students, teachers and the school leader. I also, wanted to experience “life” in the school, so a participant observation of classes, lunch time, break time, study hall, extracurricular period, dismissal and staff meetings was conducted. These various methodologies along with *prolonged engagement* at this school and *member checking* after interviews, focus groups and classroom observations helped to approach *crystallization* in this study (Denzin & Lincoln; 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Data Collection

Fieldwork began with teacher interviews during which we explored: (1) their expectations of students; (2) their rationale for coming to Excel; (3) the challenges that they faced teaching at Excel; and (4) measures they took to address these concerns. Next, classroom and participant observations were conducted over a three week period, during which each class was visited at least three times. This was followed by student focus groups, interviews with parents detailing students’ social and academic maturation

since enrolling in Excel, and follow up interviews with teachers. The school administrator was officially interviewed on two occasions, once before student focus groups and again at the completion of all data collection.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, audio-taped, and personally transcribed by the researcher. The analysis of data was a constant on-going process beginning with first interview. Emergent themes from prior interviews and focus groups were explored in future interviews to confirm any interpretations, and to add complexity to descriptions of specific events. Transcripts from both interviews and focus groups were analyzed by employing a five-step phenomenologically based meaning condensation technique outlined by Kavle (1996). Themes that emerged from interviews were cross-compared to themes that emerged from the focus groups, and explored further during observations of the school and classrooms to reveal a rich and complex collective reality.

This comparison process was informed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Strauss & Corbin (1990) *constant comparison method*, which allowed for connections to be drawn across data that was collected using the different methods revealing a fuller understanding of the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy. Each research method (interviews, focus groups and participant observation) were relied upon to create shared descriptions and interpretations of the *organizational habitus* of Excel. Four key factors emerged from this process, which were related to the development of the *organizational habitus* at this single-gender school serving urban African American males: (1)

educational justice; (2) expectations monitoring; (3) expectations casting; and (4) a culture of Effort.

The School

Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym) was opened in the summer of 2007 to serve 5th grader African American boys, and to provide an alternative for local parents in a struggling school district. The school will be expended each year until the entire shopping mall where the school is located is converted to accommodate new grades. Through the front glass of the school, a wall sized painting of a famous African American male Civil Rights leader is visible. His life serves as a model for students to pattern their lives after. On the adjacent wall, the school's mission, vision, and values are painted.

Excel is not designed like the typical school; rather, its entrance and administrative spaces reminded me of a family room in a home. The school was nicely decorated with couches, pictures, plants and inspirational quotes displayed on the walls throughout the school. The main corridor led to all of the classrooms, the lunch room and the computer lab. The walls of this corridor were decorated from eye-level to the ceiling with students' science projects, essays from English class, and other high scoring exams. Two of the walls near the rear of the corridor were covered with jerseys and information from seven different universities.

Each classroom was spacious with fifteen foot high ceilings and student setting was arranged so that three-four students could work together in groups. The English classroom had a collection of books on a desk near the classroom door from diverse

authors most of which were African Americans. Students had to select one book each day to read to themselves at the beginning of the class. The social studies class had the names and pictures of African American leaders and their contributions to American society. The School Leader's office was the only true office in the school but was mostly used for storage or for conferences with parents and students. The school leader spent most of his day as an instructional leader, moving from class to class. He also had a desk located at the front door of the school. Often times, he sat on the desk and greeted parents and grandparents as they picked their sons up after school.

The Students

Excel Academy was designed to meet the needs of urban African American males. In its first year the school served 79 fifth graders many of which struggled both academically and socially at their former schools. Also, Excel is a school with a high concentration of families at or near the poverty line, when considering that during the 2007-2008 school year 80% of their students qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program. Additionally, 36% of the students were retained in the 5th grade and 48% failed at least one portion of the State's standardized test the year before coming to Excel. Each student was also given the Stanford 10 assessment to provide a baseline in core subjects; the school summary indicated that Excel students displayed the competency in science of the average 2nd grader. Students also ranked two grade levels below the average 5th grader with reading and mathematical competency levels equal to that of the average 3rd grader.

The Participants

There were six students who participated in focus groups for this study. Each of these African American males were selected by teachers as the students that made the most social and academic improvements since coming to Excel. They were between 10-11 years old, and five out of six students lived in the community that the school was located in. Two students came from homes in which both parents were present, while the remaining students came from single parent homes. The parents of each student also took part in a focus group or an interview depending upon their schedule. The four teachers and one School Leader also participated in interviews, several classroom observations, and numerous informal conversations.

Findings

As previously noted, Diamond et al. (2004) conceptualized *organization habitus* as a set of shared teacher expectations, and a common sense teacher responsibility that impacts teachers' efforts to promote student learning. This conceptualization provided the framework to explore the school culture of Excel Academy, but the findings and interpretations of data yielded a more complex conceptualization of *organizational habitus*. Therefore, this section detailed four key factors related to the development of the *organizational habitus* at this single-gender school serving urban African American males: (1) Educational justice; (2) Expectations monitoring; (3) Expectations casting; and (4) A culture of Effort. Additionally, how these factors promoted synergy between the community and school, and within the school organization itself were discussed.

This effort allowed for a more meaningful description of the *organization habitus* of Excel Academy, and how it developed. Each of the four factors will be discussed in the order listed above to highlight their role in the establishment of the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy. Particular attention will be given to how each factor promoted *community-school* or *organizational synergy*.

Educational Justice

Excel Academy for Boys was created with the mission of providing an education that would prepare urban African American males with the “academic and social competencies” necessary to attend the college of their choice. This mission is painted on the front wall of the school entrance, and data revealed that it is shared by students, parents, teachers, and the school administrator. This goal emerged from a shared-belief by the school administrator and teachers that their school would make a difference for African American boys who had been neglected by years of *problem-centered education*. In short, the founding philosophy that undergirded the formation of this new school was *educational justice* or the belief and practice of providing the highest quality education to students who were typically denied such by the larger educational system. It is further characterized by an education focused on building the whole student, not just increasing their performance on standardized tests. The notion of *educational justice* was often eluded to but never termed as such during interviews with the school administrator or teachers. Yet, there was such synergy (agreement related action) among the administrator and teachers concerning the essence of *educational justice* that it facilitated synergy between the community and the school.

Community - school synergy

An often referenced African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child” can be applied to help us understand how families and the local community joined efforts with Excel Academy’s teachers and the school administrator to yield *community-school synergy*. This state is best described as the *village is educating its children*, which typifies educational justice by providing African American males with the support system needed to achieve in school. In fact, I observed parents, grandparents, legal guardians, the local barbers’ college, a retired Medical Doctor, an engineer, fitness coaches, a drama coach, a drumming instructor, a local food catering service, an instructional coach, a special education counselor, the Black Engineers Association, and other visitors involved at Excel in various roles. Most importantly, the *village* also includes the teachers and the school administrator at Excel Academy. This *village* model is not unique to Excel Academy, but characterized the efforts of African American communities to educate their children during Jim Crow segregation (Anderson, 2007).

Although, Excel Academy had all African American teachers and an African American male school administrator, their race did not grant them access into the *village*, instead it was their high expectations, high effort, and positive evidence of student social and academic improvement that facilitated synergy with the community. This synergy was evident in parents’ reflections about the difference between Excel Academy and the other schools. For instance, a grandmother of two Excel students shared her view:

The main difference I think between Excel and their other school is that at Excel they are very focused on students learning. If students don't understand something here they try to explain things to them in a way that they can get it, and in a way that's interesting to them. If they get stuck on a homework problem they have their teachers' cell phone numbers to get help. I also am the one who helps my grandsons with their homework, and I see a great improvement in them. First, they actually get homework every night, its challenging and now they work independently to complete their work. Before I would have to sit there in teach them things that they should have learned in school in order to complete the homework.

A father also added similar sentiments about Excel:

The teachers here are bending over backwards to help my son learn, so I bend over backwards to help the school succeed. I am really trying to help my son do well, so when the school needs something, all I need is call and I am on my way.

Last, a mother described why she enrolled her son in Excel:

Our son is a strong student, and did fine academically last year, but the school was lacking in the discipline department. We observed him in class and they would let him stand up to do his work and just walk around the room. Here they have consistent rules and they enforce them. Also, my son has never been a straight "A" student before, but he achieved that here at Excel.

The six parents or guardians that I interviewed expressed complete trust in Excel Academy to promote the academic and social maturation their sons. When I pressed them further for specific examples of how Excel Academy helped their sons, they provided vivid examples. A father shared this story:

My son is so different now, before we would have to fight with him to make him want to go to school. Now he is up and dressed before we are, so that he can be on time for school. (Laughing he continued) I remember one time, he was really sick we took him to the Doctor, and

she prescribed a breathing treatment. But he would have to miss school for a couple of days to use the treatment. My son refused the treatment and went back to school that same day.

A mother of a student who was retained in the 5th grade, but is back on track at Excel shared some of the differences that she has observed in her son.

The difference is simple; he did not pass any of the State tests last year and passed them this year. He is like a different child, he watches CNN for current events, and wants to debate politics with me. During the Democratic primary in our state, I could not tell you what was going on, but he knew everything. I also see things like, he helps clean up now, and his room is clean without me asking him to do it. Excel has exceeded my expectations in everything.

Community sentiment

Exploring the perceptions of parents further revealed that Excel Academy was increasingly viewed as a site for *educational justice* by parents, yet this was a dynamic and unfolding process. For instance, many parents expressed absolute frustration with local school districts, particularly if they were educated in community schools themselves. One mother spoke at length about why she decided to enroll her son in Excel:

I have always lived over here, and there was a time when the schools were better. Now the schools are really bad, they are not helping our kids at all. My son went through elementary school in this district, and I did not want him to go to the middle school because he started having lots of problems in the 4th grade. So, a friend of mine told me that a [national charter school system] was supposed to be starting a school in this community, and she has a child in another [National Charter School System] school. She told me all about the homework, fieldtrips and how they expect every child to go to college. That day I called her school to find out more about Excel Academy and who I could contact. They gave me Mr. Goodson's number, and I called him myself, because I wanted that type of school for my son.

This type of sentiment was repeated by all six families that I interviewed, and revealed the following common elements among parents: (1) Feeling betrayed and failed by local schools; (2) Desiring a better school for their child; (3) Hearing good things about the National Charter School System in this study from reliable sources; (4) Willingness to enroll their sons in Excel Academy; (5) Induction into Excel Academy and values; (6) Parental support for Excel Academy; and (7) A growing confidence in Excel Academy to fulfill its mission.

These shared sentiments constituted the fabric of what Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) called “collective memory” or the shared feelings and experiences of a group of people in a specific geographic area. Within this community-school context, parents gained an increasing confidence in Excel to deliver on its college preparatory mission, which encouraged the development of a positive *community sentiment* characterized by the seven themes presented earlier. In essence, parents seemed to sense that “they are on our side” according to one father. Evidence of such was that without recruiting, Excel Academy had a 60 student long waiting list for the 2008-2009 school year. This was largely due to parents referring other families, and sharing the successes of their son. In short, *community sentiment* seemed to be strengthened by Excel’s commitment to *educational justice*. This produced a *collective confidence* that encouraged Excel’s parents to invest themselves wholly in the school, but *collective distrust* facilitated an adversarial relationship between them and their past schools. Earning the trust and confidence of the community was an indispensable goal of Excel Academy, and emanated from a shared philosophy of *educational justice*.

Expectations Monitoring

Expectations monitoring was the second essential factor in Excel's efforts to promote social and academic excellence among urban African American males. The School Leader Mr. Goodson was committed to hiring, developing and continuously challenging Excel's teachers to actualize their high expectations for all students.

Interviews with Mr. Goodson also revealed that he was also constantly challenged by his superintendent to maintain high expectations among Excel's teachers. This process was labeled *expectations monitoring* to capture efforts to create and maintain an *organizational habitus* characterized by high social and academic expectations.

Furthermore, this process was not incidental, but began with careful selection and training of individuals who for the most part already possessed a commitment to teaching African American males before their employment at Excel Academy. In fact, Haberman (1995) suggested that great teachers in urban schools typically possessed a philosophy and way of teaching that promoted academic success, and this praxis can be measured before they are even hired. This was true of the four teachers at Excel Academy who each expressed their desire to work with African American males as one of the reasons that they applied to work at Excel Academy. In fact, many of them were already working to help African American males in other schools or programs. For example, Mr. King an African American male teacher became interested in working for Excel Academy when he learned that their school had very similar values to his summer mentoring program for African American males. Miss Thomas an African American

female teacher also exemplified a prior commitment to African American children as she explained:

I used to teach mostly Hispanic children, and I enjoyed doing so. I was working so hard planning lessons and everything, so I wanted to go back into my community and make a difference. So, when I learned that Excel was a college prep school, which was not the focus at my last school, I was excited.

Miss Allen's commitment was also evident as she explained why she came to Excel:

I decided to become a teacher at Excel, because I was fed up with African-American males being forgotten about. I was tired of our males joining gangs and dropping out of school. I was upset that instead of teachers teaching our males they promoted them to get rid of them or either retained them until they were so old, that finishing school was not even an obtainable goal for them.

Expectations monitoring and hiring practices

Furthermore, it appeared that recruiting, screening and hiring educators committed to teaching African American males in preparation for college was among the highest priorities at Excel. Haberman's (2005) *Star Teacher Selection Interview Training Manual* was employed throughout interviews for future Excel teachers. The Mr. Goodson was trained to use Haberman's interviewing system, which served as a tool to gauge the potential of a candidate to serve urban children effectively.

In fact, I was able to observe an interview with a teacher candidate who was asked to respond to scenarios that measured the candidate's: (1) willingness to advocate for a student; (2) to use innovative teaching strategies to reach students; (3) the level of responsibility for student learning; and (4) willingness to admit to a mistake. All four current teachers also sat in on this interview, and offered feedback to Mr. Goodson

concerning the teacher's fit with the school culture. Mr. Goodson further explained that only successful candidates from this initial screening are observed teaching if they are current teachers. Also, if candidates make it to the final phase they must complete a teaching demonstration in a class at Excel. Many of the teacher candidates were experienced African American educators from local school districts, but in their interviews or teaching demonstrations they failed to demonstrate that they held high expectations for their current students.

Organizational synergy

This organizational commitment to securing, training, and challenging high expecting teachers contributed to the alignment of expectations among teachers, the school administrator and students at Excel. The lack of an ideological struggle between the school administrator and teachers brought about organizational synergy or combined energy within the organization, which was confirmed in interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. This is not to say that teachers and the administrator agreed on everything; rather, holding high social and academic expectations for students was nonnegotiable. Having a college preparatory mission enhanced efforts to maintain *organizational synergy* by providing a tangible and socially significant goal to strive toward. Yet, in many urban schools *expectations monitoring* is not practiced, thus the varying expectations and goals of school personnel compromises the ability to foster *organizational synergy*. Warren (2002) found that many urban schools are forced to hire teachers that exhibited low expectations for the students that they serve ultimately compromising the school culture, and student learning.

Expectations Casting

A third emergent factor related to establishing positive *organizational habitus* at Excel Academy was termed *expectations casting*. Researchers typically conceptualize teacher expectations as an individualized static state, but studying the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy indicated that expectations are a dynamic group and organizational process (Diamond et al., 2004). The term *expectations casting* describes the process by which social and academic expectations were transferred among different social groups (teachers, students, parents), and how this process transformed the quality of education the students at Excel received. This process emerged from interviews with teachers and Mr. Goodson about the history, student recruiting and parental orientations of Excel Academy. Interviews with parents and an observation of a parent orientation added to the development of this concept.

This process was critical to how Excel Academy was introduced into a community with schools that were marked for state takeover, because of their academic and financial shortcomings. This key challenge required that Excel Academy effectively addressed the *negative sentiments* that parents and students developed about the local educational system. *Expectations casting* describes the process by which Excel's expectations were: **Communicated, Assessed, and Synergized** yielding a **Trusting (C.A.S.T.)** community-school relationship.

Communicating expectations

Expectations casting was initiated by Excel Academy early in the recruiting process during home visits, church visits and parental orientations. In the first year most of the recruiting was conducted by Mr. Goodson who shared with me one of his most memorable home visits:

I went to this one family's house and went through my normal recruiting speech, and the mom was ready to sign her son up right then. But the father was not convinced that his son could go to college. He was said things like 'I didn't go to college, and I'm doing ok'. So, I was about to leave, but I just couldn't. I looked him in the eye and said 'Your son will go to college, if you as his Father believes that he can'. After that they signed their son up to attend Excel, and he comes by to check on his son all the time.

This example illustrated how Excel communicated their expectations to parents. Several expectations were *communicated* to parents including: (1) the expectation that all students will attend the college of their choice; (2) the expectation that students will receive homework each night for each subject; (3) the expectation that students must attend school every day and be on time; (4) the expectation that parents would check and sign nightly homework, weekly newsletters, weekly behavioral reports, and weekly academic progress reports; (5) the expectation that all teachers will make themselves available via cell phone each night for helping students with homework; (6) the expectation that students will wear uniforms and are forbidden to wear name brand products; (7) the expectation that students had to earn a seat, desk, tie, and school blazer through consistently practicing the social and academic values of the school; (8) the expectation the teachers will contact parents each week to discuss any academic or social concerns with parents; (9) the expectation that parents address these concerns with their

sons; and (10) the expectation that students do not fight in school, but support their peers socially and academically.

Assessing expectations

Parents typically assessed these expectations and the effectiveness of the larger National Charter School System that sponsored Excel Academy by conducting some independent research. Parents reported using the National Charter School System's website to get more information, and they contacted friends and family members with children in other schools sponsored by the National Charter School System. This assessment process was ongoing by parents who noted during interviews the many improvements that they had observed in their sons. In sum, parents spoke about increased: (1) academic enthusiasm (the desire to learn and attend school); (2) effort (completing homework and studying); and (3) evidence of academic improvements (improved grades and performance on standardized tests). This ongoing assessment of Excel's expectations and the positive outcomes noted by parents promoted *community-school synergy*.

Expectations synergy

Additional interviews with parents provided further insights into how they came to share Excel's expectations for their children. For example, a father reflecting on his thoughts following a home visit with Mr. Goodson stated:

I thought it was a great idea for a school to start preparing Black males for college in the 5th grade, but that seemed too soon to me. My wife has a college degree and I completed some college, so we knew that not going to college was not an option for our son. But I thought that we would start

working on getting him to college in his 2nd or 3rd year of high school. I never thought to start him this early, but now we are focused getting him to college. Mr. Goodson makes college real to my son...they visited three universities in their first year here. Their old school never spoke of college as a possibility, although we wanted our son to go to college.

The six families interviewed were “on board” with the mission of Excel, but this synergy was promoted by Excel’s commitment to providing a college preparatory curriculum to their students, upholding social and academic expectations, and the increased academic enthusiasm, effort and evidence that parents noticed among their children.

Trusting community-school partnership

The ultimate byproduct of *expectations casting* was the establishing of trusting relationships between the community and Excel Academy, which encouraged parents to separate their *negative sentiments* about local schools from their emerging trust for Excel Academy. A grandmother of two Excel students exemplifies this *trust-distrust sentiment* as she described why her daughter enrolled her children in Excel:

I have two grandsons here at Excel they went to an academy last year and both were failing. Their school wasn’t teaching them anything, and the discipline in the school was lacking. So, when we heard about the opening of Excel Academy my daughter researched it, and we enrolled the boys. I can say that every promise that they told us in the beginning they have exceeded it. They believe in our boys, so whenever they need me, they call, and I will be here in five minutes.

The trust generated through the *expectations casting* process had immediate benefits for Excel Academy. I observed several parent conferences about student behavioral problems, and in each situation parents did not argue with Mr. Goodson but worked with him to bring their son’s behavior in line with school standards. I observed Mr. Goodson cast this expectation during a parent orientation by encouraging parents to

partner with teachers to resolve issues with students, rather than questioning the accuracy of behavioral or academic reports. He explained:

We will send you a behavioral report each week that you must sign and return. We call this report a paycheck, because students can earn or lose points each day depending on if they follow instructions or complete homework for instance. We have a store with some rewards that your son can purchase with the points that he earns over time. Don't believe your son, if he tells you that we stopped giving out pay checks, because we will never do that. If your son brings home a low paycheck one week, check the categories that he lost points in, and have conversation with him about his behavior. We provide paychecks to you as a tool to encourage conversations between you and your son about his behavior, so don't call us upset. We won't argue with you about his behavior, it has to change, but we have to work together to do that.

I also observed a parent come into Excel Academy with her two younger children at around noon, and she requested to take her son home early on a Friday. The Office Manager Miss Cook reminded her of the expectation that all students should attend class for the whole day, and removing them early will cause them to miss valuable instructional time. The parent quietly agreed and left the school without incident. This situation could have easily been more confrontational if that parent did not trust that Miss Cook and Excel had the best interests of her son in mind. The trust that parents had in Excel Academy contributed to the development of a positive *organizational habitus*.

The process of *expectations casting*: (1) communicating expectations; (2) assessing expectations; (3) synergy with community-school; and (4) trusting community-school partnership was the third factor that emerged while studying the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy.

A Culture of Effort

The fourth factor that proved critical to Excel's efforts to promote social and academic maturation among their students was a *culture of effort*. Researchers (Diamond et al., 2004; Warren, 2002) concluded that schools serving poor African American students had school cultures characterized by low teacher expectations followed by a diminished sense of responsibility and effort for student learning. Participant observations of classes, interviews with the school administrator and teachers, and focus groups with students revealed that teacher and student effort were central to the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy. This *culture of effort* is supported by the Excel's rigorous schedule, and the efforts of teachers to help student learn. Excel's required extended school day meant that teachers worked from 7am to 5pm. But, teachers regularly stayed to 6:15pm preparing materials, calling parents about incomplete homework assignments or behavioral problems, attending meetings, or strategizing about how to improve the school. Teachers and students also have Saturday school twice a month from 8am- noon, and a four week summer session. There appears to be synergy between teacher expectations and teacher effort, and school expectations and the effort expected of students.

The *culture of effort* was most evident in classrooms as teachers worked to bring students closer to grade level in core subjects. Each teacher used multiple teaching methods with culturally relevant lessons to encourage engagement among students. For instance, songs were used to help students memorize multiplication tables in math, which improved students' confidence in their ability to do math. In fact, parents

expressed that learning how to multiply was a huge accomplishment for their sons. One mother offered this account:

At my sons old school he struggled with multiplication, and I tried everything to help him. I bought flash cards, work books, videos, but he just did not get it. And his teacher wasn't helping him learn it, she taught multiplication her way and because he did not get it she did not try anything new. But after the four-week summer school at Excel my son knew how to multiply, because they made it fun for him and they explained it in a way that he could understand it.

In fact, during the student focus group they listed learning how to multiply as one of their favorite activities at Excel. They also demonstrated their mastery by multiplying multiples of 13, out load as a group.

A another example of teacher effort was when the Social Studies teacher Mr. Nance extended a lesson on skilled labor during the Industrial Revolution to a debate on the philosophies between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. This was after students seemed disinterested in the direction of the lesson. Mr. Nance's transition went like this:

Speaking of skilled labor, you guys remember Booker T. Washington...we spoke about him before. He believed that following slavery African Americans should go to school to learn skilled trades. But, there was another African American leader named W.E.B. Du Bois, a brilliant man, the first Black man to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. What did he believe African Americans should do? [Students responded, "Go to college"] Which one do you think was right?

Following this introduction students were dividing into two groups based upon which African American leader they believed had the most effective plan for African Americans. Each student group was also asked to consider which plan would best serve the needs of African Americans today. For the remainder of the class, students presented

timed point and counter points, which made labor during the industrial revolution more salient to them.

A final example of the *culture of effort* was the combined efforts of teachers and the school administrator to close the two year reading gap between their average student and the average American 5th grader. Teachers explained that many students struggled in math, social studies and science due to how their reading skills were underdeveloped by local schools. So, each teacher and the school administrator each had 8-10 students who they took through the Star Reading system to increase their reading fluency and comprehension. Yet, despite these efforts almost 40% of students did not pass the first administration of the State's standardized reading test. As a result, Mr. Goodson and the Reading teacher, Miss Allen decided to give students a three hour block of intensive reading, writing and comprehension, which resulted in a total of 81% of students passing the State's reading exam.

Also, less than half of students did not pass the first administration of the math portion of the state issued standardized test. So, students were given a three hour block of math for one week to build their math competencies. I was able to observe this entire period of instruction twice. The class had around 36 students and was team taught by both the school leader and the regular math teacher, Mr. King. Students were given a number of challenging word problems and equations to solve. The teachers re-taught adding and subtracting fractions, solving for the volume of a cube, probability, and the skills needed to solve word problems. After the second administration of the State's math exam a total of 68% of students were able to pass this exam. It is evident that there

is a *culture of effort* shared by teachers and students at Excel Academy, not a sense of diminished effort.

In sum, parents gained trust in Excel Academy over time, due to teachers' high expectations, the parents saw clear effort on the part of teachers, and the changes in their son's provided evidence of the schools effectiveness. In other cases, Excel actually raised parents' own expectations of the sons by making a college education a goal that students could strive for now rather than later. Parents further perceived a clear difference in the academic curriculum, teacher support and behavioral expectations at Excel Academy. In fact, parents were not just concerned with academic success but also the social maturation of their sons. They want excellence not just success, and are willing to partner with Excel to achieve it.

Discussion

The prior section articulated the four key factors critical to the process of establishing and maintaining of the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy for Boys. The first goal of the present section was to present the overall concept model that emerged from this case study, which was illustrated in Figure 2 - *The Building African American Males Model*. Next, implications of this model will be discussed specifically for Excel Academy. Finally, broader implications will be detailed for the emerging African American males' schools movement.

Building African American Males Model

The *Building African American Males Model* serves as an illustration of the factors and processes that emerged during the case study of Excel Academy. In sum, this process demonstrated that a school can make a difference when committed to *educational justice*, which was characterized at Excel by providing a high quality education to urban African American males despite a national and local schooling climate compromised by *problem-centered education*. This commitment fostered *community-school synergy*, which was further strengthened by hiring, training and challenging teachers to hold high social and academic expectations for students through the *expectations monitoring* process. This practice also yielded *organizational synergy*, such that the quality of expectations among teachers became shared and expected values. The third factor was *expectations casting*, which described an ongoing process of *communicating* and *assessing* expectations that promoted *community-school synergy* and a *trusting community-school partnership*.

Finally, the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy is characterized by a *culture of effort* that encouraged culturally relevant innovation and dedication among teachers and students as they work together toward social and academic excellence. Overall, Figure 2 illustrates how these four factors may integrate to produce and sustain *organizational synergy* and *community-school synergy*. Creating a positive learning environment that promotes the academic, emotional and social development of African American males.

Implications

At the onset of this work, the *problem-centered* nature of American education was detailed exposing a pattern of social-historical philosophy and practice that compromised the quality of education for African Americans. Single-gendered schools are the most recent effort to circumvent the effects of this praxis. Here the researcher provides key implications for Excel Academy and broader implications for the emerging African American males' schools movement.

Sustaining an effective organizational habitus

There are a number of critical insights to enhancing and sustaining an effective *organization habitus*, yet the most salient one will be detailed here. Efforts must be made to protect and nurture the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy. Understand that the *community-school* and *organizational synergy* that characterized the *organizational habitus* of Excel during this study is subject to change. In other words, school culture is not static destination, but a dynamic set of processes that yield to human influence. The continued of *monitoring* and *casting* of high expectations and maintaining a culture of effort will assist in strengthen the *organization habitus*.

Recall the practices or trends found to compromise educational interventions over the past twenty years: (1) schools with a critical mass of its teachers with low expectations; (2) a critical mass of teachers with a low sense of efficacy; (3) a critical mass of teachers with deficit beliefs that counter new reform ideas; (4) a critical mass of teacher lacking the knowledge and skills to teach key content areas; and (5) a school

administration that does not support reform efforts (Bray, 2007; Leggett, 2007; Lipman, 1998; Muncy and McQuillan, 1996; Senge, 1990; Smith, 2007).

These researchers' findings yield important questions for Excel's families, administration, teachers, and students to consider: (1) How can an effective *organizational habitus* be promoted if a change in leadership happenings? (2) How can Excel Academy continue to recruit, train and challenge high expecting, and highly skilled teachers as the school continues to grow? (3) How can Excel Academy support the development of teachers and students with limited financial resources? (4) How can African American parents from different backgrounds organize to support the mission and vision Excel Academy?

The African American males' school movement

The implications for the larger movement toward African American male schools center on the argument that they must be qualitatively different from schools that have traditionally failed African American males. Revisiting the six themes of problem-centered education will provide a context for these implications. The themes are:

- (1) Philosophies constructing African Americans as inherently pathological (Feagin, 2006; Mckee, 1993);
- (2) The practice of imposing Eurocentric education and research upon African Americans (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000);
- (3) The practice of attempting to promote African American student achievement through pathological and Eurocentric frameworks (Lewis et al., 2008);
- (4) Educational research that labels African American students with "risk" labels, and views their cultures as impediments to academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003);

- (5) Creating school cultures that are not responsive to African American students' cultures, teachers with low expectations, and low commitment to student learning (Anyon, 1997; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006);
- (6) The practice of "blaming the victims" of educational discrimination as a method for dismissing the professional responsibility of educators and the greater society for creating and sustaining educational disparities (Ford, 1996; Lewis et al, 2008).

These themes reveal that *problem-centered education* resists, undermines, and compromises efforts to achieve affirming schools culture that can produce the widespread academic success among African American males that is sorely needed. The emerging African American Males' School Movement must intend to this reality, and purposefully craft schools that counter the social forces that animate *problem-centered education*. Key questions that must be considered to promote this goal are: (1) How can a social and academic curriculum be crafted based on the measured competencies of highly successful African American males educated in urban schools? (2) How can a social justice education curriculum be crafted specifically for African American males' schools that integrate social studies, math, science, fine arts and reading? (3) How can African American males employed in fields other than education be encouraged to teach, and retrained to provide a critical mass of highly skilled African American male teachers? (4) How can urban teacher and school leader preparation programs best support this movement? (5) What can be learned from single-gender schools that failed?

Conclusion

The present effort argued that *problem-centered education* typifies the educational philosophies and practices of America as it relates to the education of African American males, particularly in urban schools. The latest challenge to this legacy is an emerging African American males' school movement. This article featured a case study of Excel Academy for Boys, a single-gender middle school serving urban African American males. A detailed examination of the establishment of Excel's *organizational habitus* yielded the *Building African American Males Model*. This organizational process was characterized by four essential factors that included: (1) Educational justice; (2) Expectations monitoring; (3) Expectations casting; and (4) A culture of Effort. Particular attention was given to how each factor promoted *community-school* or *organizational synergy*, which created an environment that promoted the emotional, social, and academic maturation of students.

Implications for protecting and strengthening the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy were offered, and broader implications for the emerging African American males' school movement were discussed. This exploratory case study of one of the first single-gender schools for African American males represented a critical step in assessing the effectiveness and potential of this educational intervention. However, it is much too soon to declare that Excel Academy for Boys or the African American male school movement will revolutionize how African American males are educated in America. Yet, it is safe to say, that Excel Academy represents the many possibilities that single-gender schools can offer for educating urban African American males.

CHAPTER III
NEVER QUIT:
THE COMPLEXITIES OF PROMOTING
SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE
AT A SINGLE-GENDER SCHOOL FOR URBAN
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of urban African American males at a first year single-gender charter school in the Southern region of the United States. The present case study was based on interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, students and the school administrator, and a participant observation of Excel Academy [pseudonym]. The findings of this study suggested that there were four critical complexities that emerged: *Expectations dissonance, disguised engagement, differential engagement, and expectations overload*. Remarkably, these issues were being addressed by a school value created by students and institutionalized by teachers-- To Never Quit.

Introduction

Through history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness...
(W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903)

In the preceding passage from the *Souls of Black Folk* the renowned African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) questioned the tendency to view African Americans through a *problem-paradigm*. This social philosophy considered African Americans as a naturally “weak” race, lacking the power to resist and transform their reality. Despite his pleas, African Americans were marked as a unique American problem, and subsequent attempts to integrate them into society were informed by this *problem-paradigm* (Myrdal, 1944). As a result, African Americans were granted equality under the law, but still were viewed and treated as unfit citizens (Aguirre & Turner, 2004). Currently, this contradiction is perhaps most apparent within the U.S. public educational system, in which African American’s civil rights have yet to materialize into a system of high quality education (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

Well over a century ago, Du Bois critiqued efforts denying African Americans equal access to high quality education that rested upon an application of the *problem-paradigm* referred to here as *problem-centered education*. This complex system of educational philosophies and practices can be characterized by six themes:

- (1) Philosophies supporting the notion that African American children, communities, and cultures are inherently pathological (Feagin, 2006; Mckee, 1993);
- (2) Examining African American educational experiences through Eurocentric standards, philosophies, concepts, theories and research methodologies (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000);

- (3) Crafting educational policies, programs, and other measures designed to promote African American student achievement through these pathological and Eurocentric frameworks (Lewis et al., 2008);
- (4) The educational practice of labeling African American students as “at risk”, and African American communities and cultures as the risk factors that must be circumvented in order to achieve academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003);
- (5) Creating school cultures characterized by low teacher expectations, a low sense of responsibility for student learning, and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy (Anyon, 1997; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006);
- (6) The practice of dismissing the professional responsibility of educators and the greater society for creating and sustaining educational disparities, while “blaming the victims” of educational discrimination (Ford, 1996; Lewis et al., 2008).

Arguably, educational resilience research is a prime example of *problem-centered education*. Over the last four decades numerous studies and educational interventions have been created using resiliency models attempting to improve the educational outcomes of “at risk” populations, yet these efforts have not resulted in positive systemic change in the educational system, particularly for urban African American males (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). This is perhaps due to resiliency theorists’ reliance upon demeaning “risk” labels as they construct resiliency research and interventions. If this research tradition is to contribute to positive systemic change in the educational system, it must be separated from its *problem-centered educational* traditions.

Toward this goal, the present work began by critiquing the “risk” tradition in educational resiliency research through a critical race lens. As a part of this critique the researcher advanced some guiding principles for *power-centered* research into the educational experiences of urban African American males. Second, this research

developed the concept of *excellence* as it emerged from a case study of Excel Academy for Boys [pseudonym]. Third, the present study detailed four complexities encountered at Excel Academy in their pursuit of social and academic excellence. Fourth, examples are detailed from teachers and students of how *imara* or the power to persevere advanced their efforts to pursue social and academic excellence. Finally, recommendations were offered to address each of the four complexities that emerged at Excel Academy for Boys.

Resilience Theory and the “Risk” Tradition

Overview of Resilience Theory

Over the past four decades a plethora of studies based on the concept of resiliency have sought to understand the personal, social, and environmental factors associated with children and adolescents overcoming family violence (Straus, 1983); mental illness (Goldstein, 1990); stress and family dysfunction (Rutter, 1979); as well as poverty and drug abuse (Garmezy & Masten, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1977, 1992). Resiliency within this context is seen as an individual phenomenon, a positive adaptation to adverse life circumstances (Howard & Johnson, 2000; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1990). Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2003) note that “resiliency generally refers to those factors and processes that limit negative behaviors associated with stress and result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity” (p. 2). Various researchers (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten, 1994; Masten et al., 1990) note that there are at least three major strands of resiliency research: (1) studies of exemplars from “at-risk” populations; (2) studies of how “normality” is achieved and maintained

despite stressful life circumstances; and (3) the ability to bounce back from traumatic occurrences. This first form of resiliency research is most germane to this study, because educational resilience studies emerged from this tradition.

Educational Resilience

Inquiries addressing educational resilience typically focus on exemplars from “at-risk” populations, yet definitions of educational resiliency are diverse. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) define educational resilience as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46). Also, Henderson and Milstein (1996) developed a widely cited definition of resiliency:

The capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply to the stress that is inherent in today's world (p.7).

Yet, after forty years of research a uniform or widely accepted definition or model for resiliency has not been established.

Additionally, researchers have identified any number of personal values, behaviors and attitudes common among resilient students, and less frequent among populations labeled as “at-risk” (Gordon & Song, 1994; Palmer; 1997). A quality example is Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (1992) study of 17,000 low income tenth grade students from urban communities. In this study, the researchers compared students who were labeled as resilient and non-resilient. Among other things, they concluded that their sample shared many of the traditionally identified personal

attributes of resilient children, but intrinsic motivation and an internal locus of control seemed to best predict academic success among urban students. Alva (1991) noted that the personality traits of educationally resilient students are “high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school” (p.19). Gordon and Song (1994) also contributed ten personal attributes of resilient children including: (1) positive self concept, (2) drive, (3) cognitive style, (4) temperament, (5) motivation identity, (6) knowledge of dominant culture values, (7) health and nutrition, (8) social competence, (9) life-course organization, and (10) autonomy (p. 33).

African Americans and Educational Resiliency Research

These models and many others have informed a scarce but growing body of scholarly literature in the area of educational resilience studies that are specifically focused on African American males from urban settings. For instance, Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, and Royster (1991) conducted a quantitative analysis of college attainment among African American males, and asserted that students’ educational plans and the influence of their fathers contributed to academic resilience to a greater degree than family economy status. Their study was able to quantify the impact of diverse variables on the retention of African American males, yet the lack of qualitative data made it impossible in this study to ascertain how or why variables had an impact on retention.

More recently, Gayles (2005) qualitative study of three academically successful African American male high school seniors concluded that the practical value of education motivated the participants to achieve. In other words, these young males gained the perspective that a quality education could create economic and employment opportunities for them. Also, Hawkins and Mulkey (2005) longitudinal study of middle school African American youth linked participation in sports with higher aspirations to study a college preparatory curriculum, to finish high school, and attend college. Finally, Hall (2007) research filled a gap in resiliency research on African American and Latino males by exploring how urban males define their own realities and resistance through poetry and hip hop rhymes.

These studies are representative of the latest wave of scholarly educational resiliency research that attempts to address the unique educational experiences of African American males in urban American society. More importantly, they advance the study of educational resilience by focusing specifically on the strengths not “risks” of academically successful African American males. Yet, even these studies rely on a concept of resiliency that view urban communities as sites of pathologies that compromise the potential of African American males. Many of these studies could benefit from a more complex conceptualization of resiliency common among ecological resiliency theorists, who conceptualize resiliency as emanating from interactions between individuals, communities and schools (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Lerner & Benson, 2003; Luthar, 2003; Rutter, 2005). Given these recent findings and gaps in resiliency research, the next section will offer a critique of the “risk” tradition in this line

of inquiry, because it has provided the theoretical foundation for resiliency research (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).

Critical Race Theory: Critique of Resiliency

The goal of this section is to craft a critique informed by critical race theory (CRT) that can dismiss the currently acceptable notion of “risk” in educational resilience research, particularly as it relates to African American urban males. To that end, I will first review key dimensions of CRT, then critique the use of “risk” in resiliency theory utilizing selected themes from CRT.

Critical Race Theory

During the 1990’s, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education emerged as scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) *applied its critical legal framework to explore* educational inequalities. This epistemology and methodology, was conceptualized to expose the harmful effects of racism in all levels of education, while seeking social justice and positive social change for students. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) reviewed the historical development of CRT, its major aims, and how educational researchers can more effectively employ CRT. Their synthesis provided a concise and accessible five dimension model of CRT based on the works of foundational CRT scholars. These tenets are: (1) counterstorytelling (Matsuda, 1987); (2) the permanence of racism (Bell, 1980, 1992, 1995; Lawrence, 1992); (3) Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993); (4) interest convergence (Bell, 1988); and (5) the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 1988).

Furthermore, Lynn and Parker (2006) offer a synthesis of the assumptions that undergird the formation of CRT: (1) Racism is foundational to American society, institutional in nature, and evident in daily experiences and interactions; (2) CRT is oppositional scholarship grounded in the narratives and daily experiences of people of color that unsettles Whiteness as the normative existence; and (3) CRT challenges forms of liberalism that maintain unequal power relations (Bell, 1988; Matsuda, 1987; Thomas, 1995).

Critical Race Critique

We now turn to a critique of resiliency research and its use of “risk” labels by employing the analytical lens of CRT. This critique is an application of the CRT theme “the permanence of race” synthesized by DeCuir and Dixson (2004) but articulated by Bell (1992) and Lawrence (1992). These researchers conceived that racial advantage and disadvantage are foundational principles in American society. It is therefore advantageous to explore resiliency among African American males in urban schools within a framework that is responsive to their historical, political, economic and social realities. Studies based upon “at risk” categorizations fail to meet this standard, lack the integrity, and authenticity to speak to the African American male experience.

Additionally, Howard, Dryden, and Johnson (1999) identified four fallacies related to the use of “risk” in resiliency research: (1) researchers have consistently found that the majority of children or adolescents labeled as “at risk” mature to be healthy and productive adults, which calls into question the usefulness of the “at risk” label; (2) educators often mislabel children as “at risk” because of disruptive behaviors in schools;

(3) “risk” based resiliency models tend to be grounded in deficit thinking and ideologies that essentially blame the academic shortcomings of students on their families, communities and/or cultures, while ignoring the structural inequalities that compromises the effectiveness of American education (Kozol, 2005); and (4) the “at-risk” label is most often given to student populations who are viewed as culturally, socially, and economically different from the dominant Eurocentric school culture (Goodlan & Keating, 1990; Fleming, Mullen, & Bammer, 1997; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1977, 1992). This latter critique is further supported by Waxman and Huang (1996) who concluded that the process of “at-risk” labeling has resulted in urban racial minority students being placed in “at-risk” categories at higher rates than any other group of students.

More disturbing is that Brown, D’Emidio-Caston, and Benard (2001) critiqued placing “at-risk” labels on children, because students are typically given this label prior to measurable evidence of academic failure. In fact, many of the resiliency factors identified by researchers and teachers are behaviors and attitudes that allow for the child to be easily managed in the classroom (Waxman et al., 2003). In this context, being “at-risk” has much to do with likeability and controllability rather than academic ability or potential.

Until recent cross-national resiliency research by various scholars (Ungar, 2005, Ungar & Liebenberg, 2005, Ungar, 2007; Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Othman, Kwong, Armstrong, & Gilgun, 2007), the significance of national culture to the phenomena of resiliency was not entertained. The lack of this theoretical lens among resiliency

researchers has led to over three decades of de-contextualized resiliency research. Consequently, urban communities and students of color have been labeled as “at-risk”, despite research detailing the vast funding and teacher quality equities along racial and economic lines inherent in American education (Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008). In short, “at risk” labels are often assigned not because of measurable academic shortcomings, but due to cultural, social, and economic differences between educators and diverse student populations (Goodlan & Keating, 1990; Fleming, Mullen & Bammer, 1997; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1977).

A further application of CRT yields additional critiques of educational resiliency research with specific concerns for its impact on urban African American males. First, the practice of labeling African American males as “at-risk” serves as a subtle racist code based upon ideologies of racial inferiority and colorblindness, which are manifested in education as deficit ideology (Lewis et al., 2008). Together, these ideologies deflect attention from the structural inequalities inherent within the education system, and their negative impact on African American males’ academic performance. This is achieved by framing academic underperformance as a byproduct of cultural factors and not racial inequalities (Bonilla, 2003; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997).

Second, in resiliency research, the behaviors, values and cultures of White children and communities are positioned as the normative standard against which all other cultures and communities are judged (Boyden & Mann, 2005). In this context, the resilient African American male is described as someone who can assimilate White

middle class values. Extolling African American males to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” ignores research indicating that highly successful middle class African Americans still face racial discrimination in their everyday lives (Feagin & Feagin, 2003).

Third, success is also normative in educational studies of resilience; resulting in urban students with high class ranks, higher than average scores on standardized tests, a high school diploma, or 90 or more credits in college being considered resilient in many resiliency studies. These signs of “success” are projected from mainstream society onto racial minorities who lack the same resources and social capital as members of mainstream America. It is therefore, shortsighted to expect racial minority students’ journeys to “success” or “measures of success” to follow similar paths as middle class White Americans (Ungar, 2007).

Finally, the creation and application of generalizable resiliency models makes success possible for any student through the psychological benefits of protective factors, and by assimilating socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors (Henderson & Mistein, 1996). This *one resiliency saves all* approach is not responsive to the situated realities (i.e., historical, political, economic, and social) of African American male students in urban schools. More importantly, these general models have not produced, nor are they capable of creating systemic educational reform, due to their lack of cultural authenticity.

Power-centered Research

It is now plausible to suggest that a new direction in studying success among urban African American males is warranted. This research is based upon the view that African Americans have demonstrated power in their efforts to overcome the social forces that oppose their matriculation in society. *Power-centered research* addresses the shortcomings of resilience research, and can be characterized by the following themes:

- 1) Analytical lenses that are responsive to situated realities, and that acknowledges the uniqueness of social locations such as an urban African American male;
- 2) Concepts, models, research, theories and interventions must not place normative cultural values, success markers or success pathways as the standard against which the schooling experiences' of diverse student populations are judged;
- 3) The use of terms and categories such as "at risk," "placed at risk," or "disadvantaged" must be eliminated to avoid theorizing that urban communities are the key source of academic shortcomings among urban African American males;
- 4) This new wave of scholarly research into academic success must entertain how the racialized nature of American society jeopardizes the futures of urban African American males;
- 5) Concepts, models, research, theories and interventions must possess harmony between underline philosophies, recommended policies, and school/classroom level practices and procedures. It is therefore, unacceptable to conduct research or create a program seeking to improve urban male outcomes based upon deficit thinking, or Eurocentric philosophies;
- 6) Success must be reconceptualized as a contested reality for African American males, not as given outcome following individual effort. Urban African American males must master social and academic competencies enabling them to matriculate in a society that resist their advancement. This requires more than a slippery notion of success, rather academic and social excellence among urban African American males must be understood and promoted from a *power-centered* framework.

Relation to Current Study

The ambitious goal of the previous review and critique was to provide an intellectual basis for the present study on excellence among urban African American males. Second, this critique articulated some of the critical shortcomings of traditional resiliency models, particularly problems related to the use of “risk” labels directed at racial minority learners. The final aim of the critique was to articulate the tenants of research designed to understand excellence among urban African American males. Moreover, this study applied several of the themes from this critique by creating new concepts and frameworks to understanding the educational experiences of urban African American males. The upcoming sections will detail the methodology and findings of a case study on Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym), a single-gender charter school designed to meet the unique needs of urban African American middle school males.

Methodology

Methodological Rational

The dilemmas uncovered in the critical race theory analysis of resiliency research obligate the use of a methodology and research methods that are sensitive to the lived realities of urban African American males. Supportively, Solórzano & Yosso’s (2002) articulated the tenets of critical race methodology, which inform enhanced the methodological and research framework for this study. The culturally sensitive nature of this research paradigm:

1. Foregrounds the importance of race in educational processes and its influence on every phase of research. This calls for researchers to explore the complexities that they face as racialized beings in the process of conducting research on diverse student populations.
2. Explores the complexities of race in education, but also studies how gender and class can intersect with race in educational settings and processes. In this study race and gender are central to the research design, data collection and interpretation process.
3. Critical race methodology challenges existing methods and theories informed by racist ideologies. Appropriately, the present study seeks multiple voices via diverse methods in an effort to more fully describe and interpret the experiences of participants.
4. Critical race methodology challenges racist stereotypes, low expectations and deficit thinking through producing counter-narratives highlighting the strengths and complexities inherent within diverse families, communities and schools.

Research Questions

I began this project with one general guiding question, because I did not want to presume that I knew what questions needed to be asked beforehand. My research questions materialized after a number of visits to Excel Academy, and were refined several times as the project processed. The research questions for this study of Excel Academy (a middle school serving urban African American males) were as follows:

- 1) How was social and academic excellence promoted among African American male students?
- 2) What factors arouse as Excel Academy sought to promote social and academic excellence among its African American male students?
- 3) How did the students and teachers of Excel Academy respond to these factors?

Researcher's Lens

I am an African American male, first generation college graduate, from the South side of Chicago. My brother Charles was actually the first sibling to attend college and I followed a year later. I personally understand the importance of a college education for

urban African American males. My two youngest brothers did not complete traditional high school, and unfortunately have been in and out jail for much of their teenage years. Over the years, I have spent countless hours on the phone, visiting each of them in prison, and this year marks the first time that they both have been out of prison since 1999. The goal for our family now is to provide them with the support they need to gain the type of education that will enable them to find meaningful employment.

While trying to find the best way to help my brothers, the time was approaching for me to decide on a dissertation topic. I discovered a newspaper article on a new middle school in the Southwestern region of the United States called Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym). Excel Academy is the only single-gender school a national charter school system, and was designed to serve urban African American males. After visiting the school, the School Leader Mr. Goodson (pseudonym) and I reached an agreement enabling me to research Excel for my dissertation. Since then, this research has become part of my personal journey as I continue to work on behalf of my brothers, and my younger brethren at Excel Academy and elsewhere.

The School

Excel Academy for Boys (pseudonym) was opened in the summer of 2007 to serve 5th graders in large urban city in the Southwestern part of the United States. Excel was opened to provide an alternative for local parents in a school district that was close to State takeover because of their longstanding academic and financial struggles. Excel is located in a converted shopping center with plans to renovate the entire mall in the coming years as new grades are added. Excel is not designed like the typical school;

rather, its entrance and administrative space reminded me of a family room in a home. The school was nicely decorated with couches, pictures, plants and inspirational quotes displayed on the walls throughout the school. Approaching the glass front of the school from the parking lot allowed me to see the mission, vision, and school values that are painted on the wall.

The main corridor led to all of the classrooms, the lunch room and the computer lab. The walls of this corridor were decorated from eye-level to the ceiling with students' science projects, essays from English class, and other high scoring exams. Two of the walls near the rear of the corridor were covered with jerseys and information from seven different universities. Each classroom was arranged so that three-four students could work together. The English classroom had a collection of books from diverse authors most of which were African American in a desk as student entered the room. Students had to select one book each day to read to themselves at the beginning of the class. The social studies class had the names and pictures of African American leaders and their contributions to American society. The School Leader's office was mostly used for storage or for conferences with parents and students. He also had a desk located at the front door of the school. Often times, he sat on the desk and greeted parents as they picked their sons up after school.

The Students

Excel Academy serves 79 students, and 48% of students failed the reading, math or writing portion of the State standardized test the year before coming to Excel Academy. Additionally, 36% of the students were retained in the 5th grade from last year, and 80% qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program.

In September of 2007, each student was given the Stanford Achievement Test 10th edition as a baseline assessment of their math, reading, and science readiness. The Stanford school summary indicated that on average students enrolled in Excel were outscored by 79% of 5th graders in Math, Sciences and Reading nationally. Additionally, the assessment revealed that this first cohort of students displayed the reading and mathematical competencies of the average 3rd grader, and in science the average 2nd grader.

The Participants

There were six students who participated in focus groups for this study. Each of these African American males were selected by teachers as the students that made the most social and academic improvements since coming to Excel. They were between 10-11 years old, and five out of six students lived in the community that the school was located in. Two students came from homes in which both parents were present, while the remaining students came from single parent homes. The parents of each student also took part in a focus group or an interview depending upon their schedule. The four teachers and one School Leader also participated in interviews, several classroom observations, and numerous informal conversations.

Methods

The present study is a qualitative case study detailing the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy. This methodology and research method was an appropriate choice given my desire to use multiple methods to gather data, the need to understand the school culture of Excel Academy within its lived context, and my desire to explore the underline processes at work in the education of urban African American males (Yin, 2002). Furthermore, Stake (2005) notes that “the prime referent in case study is the case, not the methods by which the case operates...the object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system” (p. 444-445). In this study, the school culture conceptualized as *organizational habitus* is the bounded system that will be explored. This case study will feature in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations of the classes and the daily routines of Excel Academy. Researchers (Duncan, 2002; Lynn, 2002; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000) detail how these traditional research methodologies can give voice to diverse populations.

Data Collection

Fieldwork spanned five weeks, and the research schedule was flexible in an effort to minimize interruptions to the “normal” operations of the school. I was able to conduct the initial interviews with teachers during a school retreat. These interviews were semi-structured, and centered on a wide range of issues such as teacher expectations, student behavior, teacher preparation, parental involvement, and why

teachers decided to work at Excel Academy. Next, classroom observations were conducted over a three week period, during which each class (science, reading, math and social studies) was visited three or more times.

Throughout my time in the field I also observed the daily routine of Excel Academy including how students transition to each class, extra curriculum period, lunch period, study hall, and dismissal. After the three weeks of official observations I conducted my first set of focus groups with the six students who teachers felt made the greatest academic and behavioral improvement since their enrollment. In that same week, I conducted interviews with parents, the school leader and a follow interviews with teachers.

Stake (2005) discusses the need for case study researchers to consider the accuracy of their descriptions, interpretations, and judgments. According to Stake (2005) *triangulation* is the procedure by which qualitative researchers seek this clarity through the use of multiple data sources and by pursuing the “diversity of perception, even the multiple realities within which people live” (p. 454). This study sought insights into the school culture of Excel Academy from the perspective of parents, students, teachers and the school leader. I also, wanted to experience “life” in the school, so a participant observation of classes, lunch time, break time, study hall, extracurricular period, dismissal and staff meetings was conducted. These various methodologies along with *prolonged engagement* at this school and *member checking* after interviews, focus groups and classroom observations helped to approach *triangulation* in this study (Denzin & Lincoln; 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, audio taped, and personally transcribed by the researcher soon after completing the sessions. Emergent themes from prior interviews were explored in future interviews to confirm any interpretations. For instance, during the first interview, an African American male teacher was asked to describe an instance in which his students failed to meet his academic standards. He replied, “Sometimes when they feel that the work gets too hard they quit, they refuse to try”. Following this interview, the phenomena of “quitting” became a topic discussed in every interview, student focus group, and I also went into classroom observations looking for confirmation of the teachers’ views and processes associated with “quitting”. The findings from this inquiry will be presented in the findings section.

Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed by employing a five-step phenomenologically based meaning condensation technique outlined by Kavle (1996). Themes that emerged from interviews were cross-compared to themes from focus groups, and the field notes obtained through participant observation and classroom observations to reveal a rich and complex collective reality.

Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Strauss & Corbin (1990) *constant comparison method* was employed throughout the data analysis process to generate a more comprehensive description and analysis of the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy. This effort revealed four complexities that emerged as teachers and the school leader sought to meet the social and academic needs of their students. These

included: (1) expectations dissonance; (2) differential engagement; (3) disguised engagement; and (4) expectations overload.

Findings

Through this research, I was moved to push beyond the currently accepted categories, theories and frameworks in resiliency research. In doing so, I sought new ways to understand and describe the complexities associated with educating urban African American males. These findings represent authentic descriptions and interpretations of educational experiences that are free from problem-centered frameworks. The findings section began with insights from parents, students, teachers, and the school administrator that detailed their perceptions on the complexities of social and academic excellence among African American males. This will be followed by a discussion of four complexities related to educating African American males at Excel Academy.

Promoting Excellence

This section explores the complexities of promoting social and academic excellence among students attending Excel Academy. The concept of *excellence* rather than success provided a more accurate description of the goals that parents, teachers, and the school administrator shared for the young men at Excel Academy. The need for this distinction emerged over the course of fieldwork during which I observed an equal focus on both social and academic maturation. So, simply doing well on state issued standardized tests was not the ultimate marker of success at Excel.

Instead, the school's mission statement and vision called for: (1) the development of both social and academic competencies; (2) every student will be prepared to enter the college of their choice in the year 2015; and (3) upon completing college students should return to Excel Academy to serve future students. In this light, *excellence* can be described as an on-going developmental process concerned with instilling key academic and social skills into African American males that are critical to their matriculation in a society that resists their achievement. Unlike common conceptualizations of success, excellence is a process of continual growth, not a state that can be achieved. The next two subsections detail how Excel Academy perused both social and academic excellence.

Social excellence

One of the ongoing challenges facing Excel's School Leader, Mr. Goodson (pseudonym) is creating a supportive and safe school environment that promotes the social maturation of students while enhancing the academic mission of Excel Academy. As a result, Excel Academy is a discipline centered school, in which violations are confronted with immediate (verbal warnings) and delayed consequences (loss of privileges). Thus far, this has created a school that parents and students perceive to be free of bullying and fighting, which was a common concern for them at their former schools. Fighting was however a concern in the beginning of the year at Excel Academy as students struggled to interact with one another without resorting to physical confrontations.

In response, every student was sent through an anger management course, and wrote reflective essays on how fighting compromises the school community. When asked to explain the behavioral improvements among students, the School Leader Mr. Goodson stated:

When people come here they are amazed at how smoothly classes run. They see that our students are sitting in their seats, and working quietly. But they don't understand that they were not this way when we got them nine months ago. They were used to running the classrooms and doing what they wanted to. It took hard work and consistency to create this type of learning environment, it's not magic.

Creating this school environment began with teachers' setting high on social-behavioral expectations, and following through on them. Miss Allen, the English teacher spoke candidly about her view on Excel's social expectations during an interview:

Our social expectations are for our young men are to behave like gentlemen at all times. We expect our males to treat women with respect and not like sex objects. We expect our males to grow up and be fathers to their kids, even though 80% or more of their fathers are absent from their lives.

The Science Teacher, Miss Thomas added:

I expect my students to come into class quietly, take their seats, and work hard throughout the course. I don't accept talking out, talking back, or quitting. My students know what to expect of me and they know what I expect of them. This year we spent a lot of time on teaching them how to be students.

Also, the Social Studies Teacher, Mr. Nance shared with me the S.L.A.N.T. acronym, which stands for: (1) Sit up Straight; (2) Look attentive; (3) Ask Questions; (4) Nod your head if you understand; and (5) Track the Speaker. This model served as a

measurable framework for expected classroom behaviors, and is used in varying degrees by all teachers to manage their classes. Teachers also used a number of verbal prompts to structure student participation during class, and the most commonly used prompt was “1, 2, 3”. On this prompt, students raised their hands and waited to be called on to answer a question posed by the teacher. The “5,4,3,2,1” or “3,2,1” prompt was the most often used prompt to refocus noisy students in the hallway or during lunch time. For the most part, they worked and helped teachers keep students on task the vast majority of class. The interviews revealed that parents, students, and teachers have noticed behavioral and attitudinal improvement in students. Yet, during the participant observation, I found examples of why Mr. Goodson told me “We still don’t have it right yet”. These complexities will be discussed following the upcoming section on academic excellence.

Academic excellence

It is clear that Excel is dedicated to academic excellence among its students, yet achieving this is a complex endeavor. Evidence of effective academic progress in core subjects are supported by improvements in students’ grades, *Stanford 10* reading scores, school results on the State’s Standardized tests, and by students’ reflections on the gains that they have made.

One of the most memorable moments in the study was during the focus group with the six students that all teachers selected as the best turnaround stories at Excel Academy. I asked these students to describe some things that they learned at Excel that

they did not learn at their old schools. They listed around 20 different things in a few minutes; here are some of their statements:

- “I was never taught about hypotheses in science”
- “I never learned about mammals and amphibians”
- “I never did an experiment in science before”
- “I learned how to add fractions”
- “I never was taught how to do word problems”
- “I know how to multiply now”
- “I can convert a fraction into a number”
- “I was never told to read a newspaper”
- “I never thought about current events”
- “We never talked about presidents and stuff”
- “We never did debates in class”
- “I could not read when I came here, but now I can.”
- “I was a bad reader but now I like to read”
- “I can spell any word now, if I study it”
- “I failed all of my State’s tests last year, and I passed them here”
- “I did not like school before, and I never missed a day at Excel”

I also asked them to describe their teachers at their old schools, and they replied:

- “My teachers did not teach me anything”
- “My teacher put worksheets in front of us and did not explain it”
- “My teacher did not try to teach she was on her cell phone”
- “My teacher just did not care”
- “I never got homework”
- “My teacher told the whole class that I failed the State’s tests last year”

I then asked them to tell me about their teachers at Excel, and they offered:

- “They tell us they we will go to college in 2015”
- “They want us to be senators and doctors”
- “They don’t like it when you quit, they want you to keep trying”
- “They want us to come back and run the school after we graduate from college”
- “They care about us”

Despite the progress that students have made and their positive sentiments toward Excel Academy, the reality still is that much work remains in their pursuit of excellence. In

fact, fieldwork uncovered four complexities that students, teachers and the school administrator confronted.

Complexities Promoting Excellence

This section will explore four complexities encountered while promoting social and academic excellence among students at Excel Academy. Initial evidence of these complexities emerged from teacher interviews, and then classroom observations, student focus groups and following up interviews with teachers were used to understand each phenomenon in greater depth. The four complexities were given terms as they emerged following repeated observations, interviews, and focus groups. They included: (1) *expectations dissonance*; (2) *differential engagement*; (3) *disguised engagement*; and (4) *expectations overload*.

Expectations dissonance

Like any school Excel Academy is not perfect with key areas of concern that included classroom management and student discipline. The following example suggests that having high expectations academically must be matched by equally high expectations for student behavior. Despite the standards that teachers expressed during their interviews there was clear evidence that some teachers experienced *expectations dissonance*. This concept emerged from fieldwork and describes how some teachers' social expectations varied for different cohorts of students. That is to say, that their social expectations fluctuated for different groups of students, while their academic expectations remained constant.

For instance, before three of the classes in which most of the disruptions occurred, teachers let me know ahead of time to expect behavioral problems. In essence, they fully expected behavioral problems, which may have caused them to prepare themselves in advance to be a disciplinarian or to react severely to student misconduct. Interestingly enough, teachers still expected all students to do the same work and challenged all groups equally. But, after they shared their low expectations with me, I created a column in my field-journal for *teacher disposition*. This enabled me to describe each teacher's their body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and use of disciplinary measures.

In classes before which teachers expressed low student social expectations they became disciplinarians. They were focused on achieving total compliance beginning with demanding "silence" more often than anything else. The S.L.A.N.T. model during these classes was replaced with the S.L.A.N.T.S model. The first "S" is for silence in this model, because it was asked for more than anything else when teachers expected problems in a class. The *expectations dissonance* that teachers demonstrated caused them to punish students for the same offenses that were excused during their earlier or later classes.

At the end of the school day, I showed the teachers my fields-notes describing their dispositions and discipline patterns during different classes. I also reminded them about the expectations that they shared with me before their classes. To my surprise, the teachers agreed and understood my observations, for one teacher this process confirmed a concern that was already raised by the School Leader Mr. Goodson as well. So,

teachers must find synergy between both sets of expectations for all of their classes and students, or they risk contributing to the very behavioral problems that they are trying to prevent.

Disguised engagement

The second complexity that I observed during my first set of classroom observations was that teachers caught only a small fraction of misbehavior. So, on day two of observations, I decided to increase my participation in classes by casually walking and observing the quality of work that students were doing. I focused on the quality of work because during interviews some teachers were worried that students' work still did not meet their standards. I found that some students were engaged with high quality work; while others looked engaged enough to avoid detection by the teacher but their work was incomplete or incorrect. The concept of *disguised engagement* emerged after synthesizing classroom observations, and it is characterized by: (1) social engagement to avoid teacher's attention; (2) social disengagement when not directly supervised by teachers; and (3) incomplete class work.

After noticing this initial pattern, I returned to a more passive observer role and noted every off-task behavior (e.g., talking, hitting, getting out of seat, drawing, writing raps), which was common in about 20% of students depending on the cohort. I also noted if the teacher responded to or missed the behavior. I further noted the location of students who were involved and when they decided to "act out". A pattern emerged among students with incomplete work; and more so among students whose work sheets were blank.

First, when teachers were instructing the whole class these students sat up straight, looked attentive, appeared to be writing, and nodded their heads. In essence, they conformed to the S.L.A.N.T. model mentioned earlier. But soon after the teacher turned to the board or provided help to a specific student the same few students disengaged and exhibited off-task behaviors. But, they instantly conformed to S.L.A.N.T. when they felt the teacher's attention was back on the whole class.

This was difficult for teachers to detect, because these students conformed to the picture of a model student to disguise their lack of academic engagement. It was as if I was a part of two classes, one in which 18-25 students were on task and learning, and another in which 6-9 students were not engaged. These same students tended to be reprimanded and sent from the class more often than students who were genuinely engaged. Yet, the social expectations of teachers also matched student behavior.

Differential engagement

After spending time with the two cohorts that struggled with *disguised engagement*, I wanted to see if the third cohort of students also exhibited a similar pattern. The third complexity emerged from this inquiry, which requires an explanation of how it emerged. Three new cohorts of students were formed following the first administration of the State's standardized tests in reading and math. The students who passed both tests were placed into this third cohort, and attended their regular classes. The other two groups received a three hour block of instruction to prepare them for the retake of the math or reading State's Tests. This strategy enabled 81% students to pass

the reading test, and 67% of all students to pass the math portion of the State's standardized test.

The cohort who passed both tests the first time was also regarded as the most mature and well behaved group of students by teachers. In a similar fashion, teachers whispered their expectations to me about this group before class as well. Mr. Lawrence the math teacher shared:

Now this group will be totally different from the other group. They are really sharp and I won't have any problems with their behavior. We have actually finished the entire 5th grade curriculum already, and I have started on the sixth grade curriculum.

Mr. Lawrence's statement reveals a degree of synergy between his social and academic expectations for this cohort of students, so I was interested to see if his teaching would be affected by his expectations. During this observation, Mr. Lawrence was correct, they were on task, and finished the same work that caused *disguised engagement* among the other cohorts, in a matter of minutes. Mr. Lawrence then proceeded to the work from the sixth grade curriculum using examples from their everyday experiences to explain new concepts. When he finished instructing he assigned some practice work from the new curriculum, and they completed the work and asked for more.

So, I decided to follow this same group throughout the day and found similar patterns in their English class, but a different pattern emerged in one class, Mr. Nance's Social Studies course. During this class, over 60% exhibited the same disruptive behaviors as the other cohorts, but their work was complete and correct. The exact scenario repeated itself during two additional observations of the same class with this same group of students.

Following the third observation, Mr. Nance shared with me his frustrations with making his class more interesting to students. He felt particularly hurt given that state of his class, because he is an African American male who struggled to make Social Studies meaningful to his students. He further shared how he wanted to use more strategies such as debates and discussions, but as a first year teacher he was not quite sure how to do so. So, I shared how I used debates when teaching multicultural education and sociology courses to engage my college students. The following class Mr. Nance used a discussion on skilled labor during the industrial revolution to transition into a debate on the economic and educational philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois. During this exercise, students were engaged both behaviorally and academically, which caused me to ponder the source of the social misconduct that I noticed during other classes.

I was certain that their misbehavior was not a classroom management or discipline issue, because Mr. Nance used the same system as other teachers and was very organized teacher. Misbehavior was not caused by dissonance between his social and academic expectations, because he expected excellence in both domains. This situation raised countless questions, so I spoke with Mr. Nance about what I noticed again, and he replied:

Yes, I have been told that students think my class is boring. I struggle to make things like the industrial revolution interesting to them. Part of it is that the students know that they won't have to take the social studies portion of State's Test until the 8th grade. I know that they want to do more debates and current event discussions, but I have to figure out a way to structure them in. You saw in class today when they got a chance to debate each other, they came alive.

This conversation helped me to crystallize this complexity, which was characterized by academic engagement but social disengagement among students. The term *differential engagement* materialized after this realization, and I deemed that it was most related to the content and delivery of the Social Studies curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2006). After reading a number of his lessons plans, I saw that Mr. Nance's lessons met or exceeded state standards. He also had challenging homework assignments and students' grades indicated that they were mastering key state objectives. A key to understanding this puzzle was that *differential engagement* dissipated when he used more interactive teaching strategies designed to promote critical thinking.

But as a first year teacher, he found it a daunting task to transform the state standards-based curriculum to a social justice-centered curriculum that could engage urban African American males. In fact, there are only a few social justice curricula in preparation and even fewer have been tested to see if they could increase motivation and achievement among students (Cammarota, 2007). Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs do not offer courses on how to teach social justice to middle school urban African American males, so Mr. Nance's struggles to do so are understandable. What is clear however is that *differential engagement* will persist unless students are challenged intellectually with a cultural relevant curriculum.

Expectations overload

The final and the most troublesome complexity to promoting academic and social excellence is the pattern of quitting observed among some students. This theme emerged as teachers responded to the interview question: Describe an example when

your students have failed to meet your academic or social expectations? The Math Teacher, Mr. Lawrence explained:

A student does not meet my expectations when he quits. If they just give up because they might feel that the work is too hard. They would just sit there with blank papers, and won't even try. I tell them "All I want is for you to try it, and ask questions if you don't understand". Just don't quit on us.

Miss. Thomas the Science Teacher further explained:

I have seen students quit when the work gets too hard, they would just not try it and put their heads down.

For a follow-up question I asked them: If you could guess, what percentage of students do you feel quit? All teachers estimated a range between 25-30% of students quit at this current point in the year, but also shared that over half of their students used to quit on a regularly basis earlier in the year.

Following these interviews, I began school and classroom observations intent on understanding the phenomenon of "quitting". It did not take long, because my first observation was in a class with of a group of students who were relearning skills in preparation for the retake of the math portion of the State's Test. Before class, Mr. Lawrence gave me a copy of the work that students were going to be doing for that day. I sat down and looked over all of the problems, and thought to myself that these are some tough problems, many of which were word problems. So, I began to document every interaction and behavior that I saw in the classroom. This is when I first noticed signs of *disguised engagement* (behaving, misbehaving, and incomplete work). I observed closely the work of some students and noticed that many of their word problems and more complex problems were incomplete.

I followed this group of students to their science course, in which Miss Thomas prepared a lesson and experiment to help students understand hypotheses, controls and variables. Curious, I took a look at the same set of males' papers from math that struggled with word problems, and found that they had not attempted all of their work in science. Particularly missing were responses to higher order thinking questions like: What are some differences and similarities between mammals and amphibians? Later in class they also did not complete questions that required them to read a short example of an experiment and select the hypothesis, variables and control.

The following day the same patterns emerged among the same group of students, which was only around ten out of thirty-five students during math, and five out of twenty students during science. On the second day of observations I became more active helping students with problems in math and with understanding some of the concepts in science. All classes were arranged so that students could work in groups of three to four students, and in most cases entire groups were not completing their work. Another interesting observation was that these groups tended to be in the back row, grouped together, and in the furthest corners from the teacher.

When I approached students I typically asked: "Why are you sitting here and not working?" Students responded with "I don't understand this," "I can't figure this out," "I don't know what to do," or "I don't get it". For instance, one problem in math asked them to: Calculate the volume of a cube when the side equals 7? Most students that I observed sketched a three dimensional cube on their papers, but could not go any further. I later found out that Mr. Lawrence brought cubes to class during the lesson on

volume, so they recalled the cube from former lessons. Some even understood that a cube is equal on all sides, but none of them knew the equation for the volume of a cube. It was written on the board and highlighted, but they never made the connection. Perhaps because the equation read: $V = \text{height} \times \text{width} \times \text{depth}$. So, I reminded them about the equation on the board and used the cubes that they drew on their papers to show them the height, width and depth of a cube. They read the problem again and were able to complete the problem on their own. I found that students needed around 30 seconds of individualized instruction to explain concepts, and then they were more than willing and capable of completing the required computation on their own.

This pattern held in three core subjects out of four for this same group of students. Afterwards, I asked myself: Are these students quitting or is there something else occurring? Quitting from the teachers' perspective is when a student does not complete the work, does not attempt the work and does not ask for help, because these are the behaviors that they typically observed. I contend that *quitting* is symptomatic of a larger process, namely *expectations overload*. This concept helps us to consider: What challenges a student faces when he is placed in a school with high academic expectations for the first time in his life? This change in normative systems may very well yield a form of *intellectual shock* unexplored in educational research. This temporary state may be caused by students being exposed to high social and academic expectations by teachers, parents and their peers for the first time in their lives. This culture of high expectations required students to utilize social and academic competencies that many of them were never challenged to activate in their former schools.

Understanding how the school and students responded to address the pattern of “quitting” requires exploring the school’s core values. Excel Academy for Boys is designed for African American males, and has adopted the seven values of Kwanzaa, the African American celebration of family, community and culture. Students memorized each value through songs, and each student must sign a “student commitment to excellence” agreement promising to uphold the seven values of Kwanzaa. These are the Kwanzaa values and how they are articulated at Excel Academy:

- 1) Unity – We work to create togetherness, harmony and we seek peace;
- 2) Self-determination – We work to define how we will be known;
- 3) Collective Work & Responsibility – We work to solve problems and seek solutions;
- 4) Cooperative Economics – We work to make sure that there is enough, we share;
- 5) Purpose – We work with urgency and intent, we seek our destiny;
- 6) Creativity – We work to make things better, we seek service;
- 7) Faith – We believe in ourselves and others, we seek the best in everyone.

Interestingly enough, during the course of interviews and focus groups I learned that students and teachers developed an eighth value in response to quitting, “Never Quit”. The “Never Quit” value emerged in direct response to this tendency, which affected both the efforts’ of teachers and students as they encountered social and academic complexities. Each of the seven Kwanzaa values are typically taught to children in their Swahili form. *Imani* for instance is Swahili for faith, but there is no direct translation to Swahili for “Never quit”. However, the Swahili noun *imara* means perseverance, endurance, power, or strength. Here *imara* is defined as the power to persevere, and it captures the combined efforts of families, teachers and students as they pursued success together, despite the complexities that they encountered along the way.

In the end, I do not believe that it is important to answer the question: Are students quitting? But, what I am certain of is that *quitting* is not an option at Excel Academy. They won't let each other quit. If you visit Excel you may hear a teacher ask a question, and call on a student who may begin to struggle to find an answer. Look again, don't be caught off guard by his classmates extending their hands toward him and tickling their fingers as if they were playing a piano. This is how the young men of Excel Academy encourage each other to keep thinking, keep working, never quit. Down the hall in another class you may hear students chanting "never quit, never, never quit... never quit, never, never quit. This is their eighth school value never quit, always persist and persevere.

Discussion

Despite the four complexities encountered in the pursuit of excellence the students and school forged values that have enabled them to persist. This contradicts notions that African children, communities and cultures are detrimental to success among students. It is this shared power that animated the efforts and expectations of students and teachers, and represents a localized movement to address the complexities that they encountered. A synthesis of this process was developed, and a typology created to illustrate how imara or the value of "never quit" related to efforts to redress the four complexities.

The *imara cycle* detailed in figure 3 is a conceptualization illustrating on how social and academic excellence can be promoted among urban African American male learners despite complexities. In essence, the *imara cycle* describes how the actualized vision of Excel Academy galvanized the local African American community, students and teachers to create a space in which students could summon the power to persevere and persist toward social and academic excellence. The five major elements in the *imara cycle* are: (1) The power to persevere; (2) expectations dissonance; (3) disguised engagement; (4) differential engagement; and (5) expectations overload. In sum, a spirit of perseverance pushed teachers to: (1) find innovative ways to teach material; (2) to employ different strategies to promote behavioral excellence; (3) to seek students' advice on how to improve their classes; and (4) to possess optimism for continued success in the upcoming year. Among students imara created: (1) a desire to achieve and meet Excel's academic and social standards; (2) a peer culture that encouraged the pursuit of academic and social excellence; and (3) a belief that teachers have their best interest at heart. Yet, specific recommendations for addressing each complexity are warranted.

Recommendations

In my view, the complexities articulated in the prior sections are signs of a healthy, growing school. In this section, I will offer recommendations to address *expectations dissonance, disguised engagement, differential engagement, and expectations overload*. The goal of this section is not to offer universal

recommendations for all single-gender schools serving African American males in urban settings; rather, readers should consider these insights as guides to understand and address specific cases in their schools.

Expectations Dissonance

Maintaining high expectations for students is always a challenge, because it is a dynamic process. One technique that I find helpful is a *self check* before teaching. I ask myself a series of questions on the way to work:

- 1) How do you feel today? Acknowledge within yourself the various personal factors that might influence your disposition with your students, today. This is extremely important for African American male teachers, because their quality of interaction with the African American males will determine how closely a student will decide to emulate him;
- 2) Why do I teach? Being a purpose-inspired teacher will help you to take a developmental approach with your students. You should have a firm but care-centered commitment for your students. Firm consequences follows inappropriate actions, but so should a developmental moment to reassure students;
- 3) Am I excited about my lesson today? If you are not reasonably excited about your lesson, an African American male student will figure it out. African American males will equate your level enthusiasm about a subject with its level of importance;
- 4) What's my level of tolerance for misbehavior? Teachers should not love to discipline but discipline because they love. Indiscriminate disciplining promotes anger, confusion and frustration in African American males, and compromises your effectiveness in teaching them.

Many times teachers set their expectations for students before class even starts, performing a *self check* will allow you to walk into the classroom with success inducing expectations.

Disguised Engagement

All single-gender schools for urban African American males should take baseline reading, science, and math measurements on each student, and sort students into heterogeneous groupings to avoid the harmful effects of tracking (Steele, 2004). Yet, overcoming *disguised engagement* is also an issue related to resources and support. Haberman's (1995) research on successful teachers of urban children found that great teachers used whole-class instruction, and avoided moving from student to student addressing specific concerns. Teachers at Excel Academy primarily use this method, but the effectiveness of this strategy is short-circuited if a student disguises his engagement. To address this likelihood having smaller classes of 20 students or a teaching assistant would allow for both whole classroom instruction and individualized instruction to occur simultaneously.

Differential Engagement

Contrary to popular opinion, African American males are intelligent, and their curiosity can be sparked or extinguished by teachers and poorly designed curriculums (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). For African American males whose intellectual curiosity has smothered by years of poor instruction and irrelevant curricula, teaching to the proverbial "middle" will create behavioral problems. Teachers in single-gender schools for African American males should teach to the *outer edge*, and provide support to students as they grapple with new knowledge. Teachers at Excel Academy taught to this *outer edge* by using experiments, creative writing, current events, and complex word problems. Yet, their lack of resources did not allow them to have smaller classes or

teaching assistants to provide the greater support to students. The scarcity of resources caused much of the complexities noted throughout this paper.

Expectations Overload

I would argue that a school's expectations are not high enough, their curriculum is not challenging enough, and their social expectations are not in line with excellence if they do not see signs of *overload*, particularly early in the school year. This is not to be avoided but carefully induced. When noticed, proper support should be given to students by teachers and parents. To induce *overload*, schools should begin with the goal of preparing all African American males to graduate with honors from the college of their choice. Next, design and sequence a curriculum that will prepare them with the intellectual and social competencies necessary to excel in college, not just to attend. Make sure that the curricula and teacher lesson plans meet state guidelines, are culturally relevant, require the use of technology, experimentation, and written and verbal articulation.

Most importantly, perhaps the greatest resource to help students overcome *intellectual shock* is their peers in the context of peer support groups (Khan & Reis, 2006). Again, I would be concerned if African American males are not exhibiting signs of *expectations overload*. This may ultimately mean that the new school environment and expectations are too similar to the schools that have failed them in the past. So, induce, look for, and respond to *expectations overload*.

Conclusion

Over a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois posed this question concerning the African American experience: “How does it feel to be a problem?” Today, on the hills of four decades of problem-based resiliency research we must now ask: How does it feel to be told that you are a problem? In schools across this country, African American males are perceived and treated as the problem child, the “other citizen”. They are called disadvantaged, at-risk, troubled youth, a lost generation among many other names. This chorus is joined by policy makers, researchers, and educators who for the last half century have crafted *problem-centered* approaches to school reform based upon this jaded image of African American culture, families and children. We now stand at a crossroads, for it is clear that these measures have failed to transform American urban education in a manner that would promote excellence among African American males (Kozol, 2005; National Urban League, 2007; Nuguera, 2008; Nuguera & Wing, 2006).

This work represents a contribution in a growing effort to define African American male educational realities and experiences in terms and theories that break free from the *problem-based* approaches that have compromised the integrity and effectiveness of resiliency research. When researchers consider urban children and families as *problems*, they are not allowed to be complex, flawed and powerful, all at once (Landsman, 2004; Washington Post, 2007).

Toward this goal, this work offered a critical race theory critique of educational resilience research and advanced some guiding principles for *power-based* research into educational excellence among urban African American males attending a single-gender

school. Second, the present study detailed four complexities encountered at Excel Academy in their pursuit of social and academic excellence. Third, I provided examples from teachers and students of how *imara* or the power to persevere advanced their efforts to pursue social and academic excellence. Finally, recommendations were offered to address each of the four complexities that emerged at Excel Academy for Boys.

These four complexities are not signs of community teacher or student deficits; rather challenges such as these should be expected when trying to serve a population of students who have been neglected by the wider educational system (Noguera & Wing, 2006). To the credit of all involved with Excel Academy for Boys they have adopted a set of values that emanate from within African American culture, which provides a culturally relevant framework within which these complexities are being addressed. More importantly, when these values were not enough the students and teachers fashioned one that gave them the power to persevere and to never quit.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: PROBLEMS AND CONTRADICTIONS

The goal of the present work was to provide an intimate portrait into the experiences of African American males attending a single-gender school in the Southwestern region of the United States. In doing so, the present study unfolded and I tried to accurately document the *organizational habitus*, and the complexities associated with educating urban African American males in a single-gender school.

Common Themes

It is my hope that this work achieved the following six aims:

- 1) Offered six themes that characterize *problem-centered education*:
 - a. Philosophies constructing African Americans as inherently pathological (Feagin, 2006; Mckee, 1993);
 - b. The practice of imposing Eurocentric education and research upon African Americans (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000);
 - c. The practice of attempting to promote African American student achievement through pathological and Eurocentric frameworks (Lewis et al., 2008);
 - d. Educational research that labels African American students with “risk” labels, and views their cultures as impediments to academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003);
 - e. Creating school cultures that are not responsive to African American students’ cultures, teachers with low expectations, and low commitment to student learning (Anyon, 1997; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006);
 - f. The practice of “blaming the victims” of educational discrimination as a method for dismissing the professional responsibility of educators and the greater society for creating and sustaining educational disparities (Ford, 1996; Lewis et al, 2008).

- 2) Presented an alternative explanation for the systemic disenfranchisement of African American male learners in urban America. The *triple jeopardy theory* asserted that problem-centered social *ideologies*; discriminating educational, legal, and economic *institutions*; and *individuals* socialized by both these epistemologies and social systems work together to limit the life chances of African American males.
- 3) Critiqued the usefulness of resiliency theories and debunked the practice of using various “risk labels” that are typically coupled with this strand of inquiry. This research is compromised by blaming academic disparities among African American male students and other racial/ethnic groups on pathologies seen as inherent in African American children, communities and cultures, while ignoring the structural inequities in the educational system, the legacy of *problem-centered education*, and *triple jeopardy*.
- 4) Described how Excel Academy for Boys established its *organizational habitus* by articulating the four key factors that promoted an affirming school culture: (1) Educational justice; (2) Expectations monitoring; (3) Expectations casting; and (4) A culture of Effort. Particular attention was given to how each factor promoted *community-school* or *organizational synergy*, which created an environment that promoted the emotional, social, and academic maturation of students.

- 5) Offered specific implications for protecting and strengthening the *organizational habitus* of Excel Academy, and broader implications for the emerging African American males' school movement were discussed.
- 6) Finally, this study introduced *the imara cycle* based on the Swahili noun *imara*, which can be described as the *power to persevere*. This model was born from the experiences of students and teachers as they encountered four complexities in their pursuit of social and academic excellence. Those complexities were: (1) *expectations dissonance*; (2) *differential engagement*; (3) *disguised engagement*; and (4) *expectations overload*.

Implications

Taken together these six aims provided intimate insights into complexities and experiences that may be common among other single-gender schools serving urban African American males. Yet, due to the lack of studies in such schools this work adds to our understanding of the potential of single-gender schools for African American males. This study is specifically useful for understanding the induction of a single-gender school into a community in which schools have traditionally failed African American children. Lastly, the present study allowed for an articulation of how the *organizational habitus* of Excel developed in the school's first year, which provides a framework that could prove useful as the African American males' school movement progresses.

On a final note, this work began with a haunting question from W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) work *The Souls of Black Folk*. He asked: "How does it feel to be a problem?" So, at the conclusion of this endeavor it is now appropriate to fashion a response to the question Du Bois posed so long ago. Securing equitable education for African Americans continues to be problematic in America, because maintaining the current inequality or advancing true educational equality holds the same fate for America. Both the status quo and an educational revolution call into question the integrity, morality, and the founding virtues of American society. In this light the question that remains and must be considered by American educators is: How does it feel to be a contradiction? To partake for oneself yet deny to others the educational benefits of a land flowing with milk and honey. Today, African American children are still not allowed to fully partake of America's educational bounty, because to do so will unearth the great contradiction of this nation. Nevertheless, until America is willing to embrace its contradictory nature, a proverbial line must be etched across the nation with the promise that the education of African Americans will no longer be deferred.

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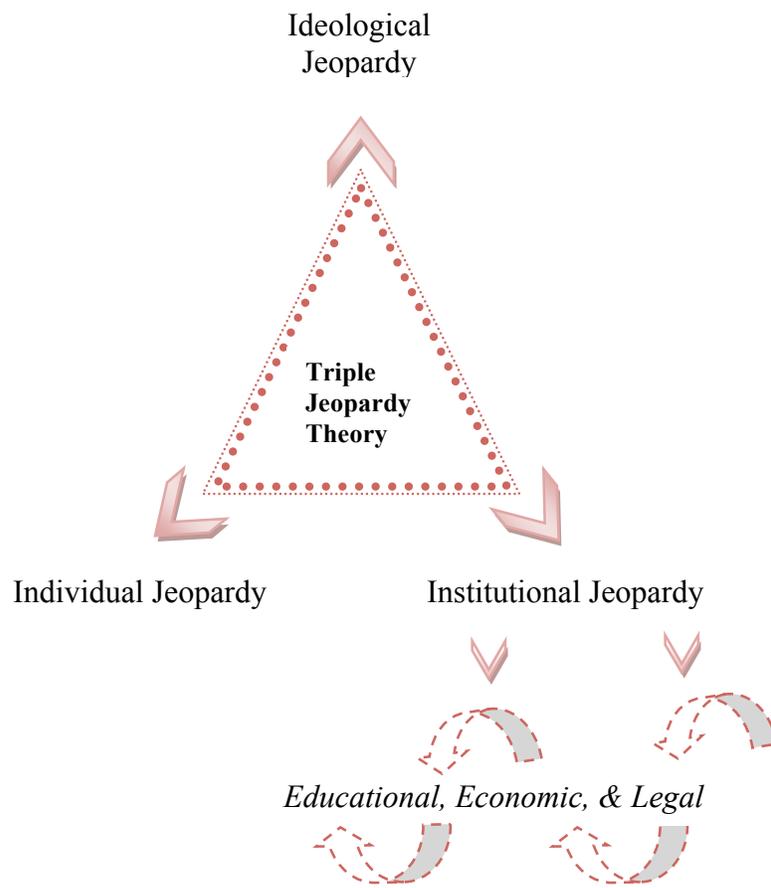
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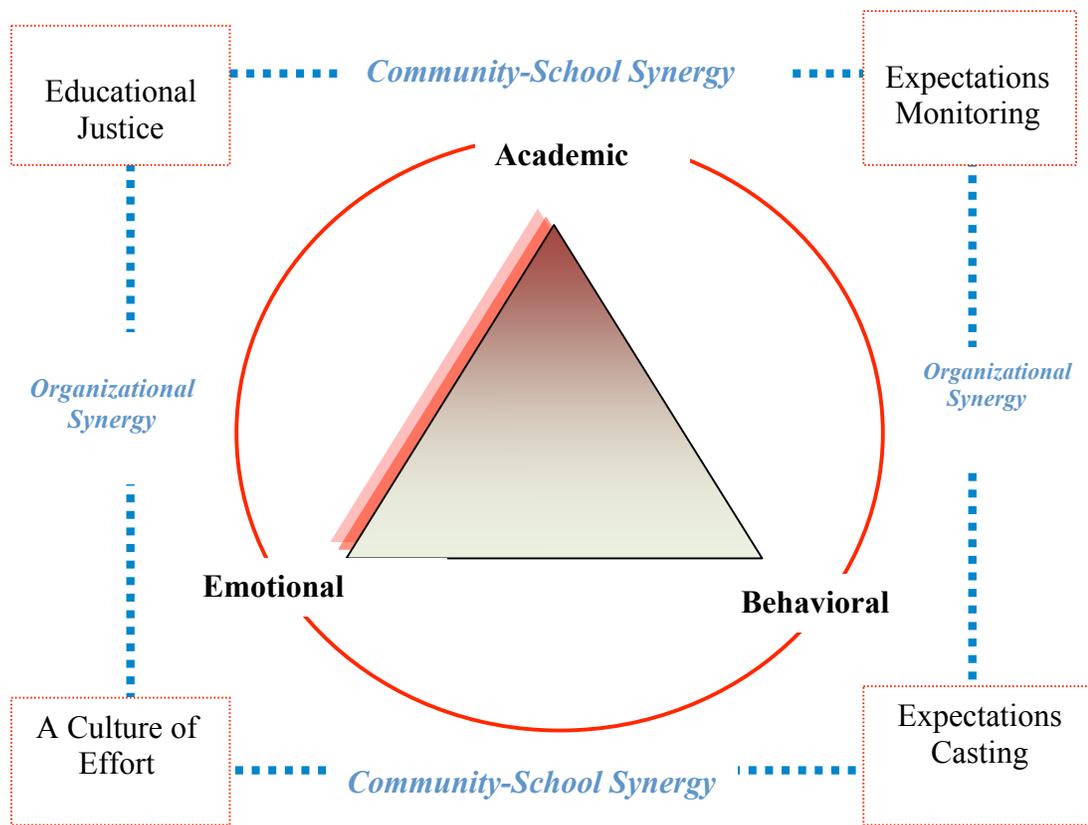
APPENDIX A

Figure 1 - Triple Jeopardy Theory



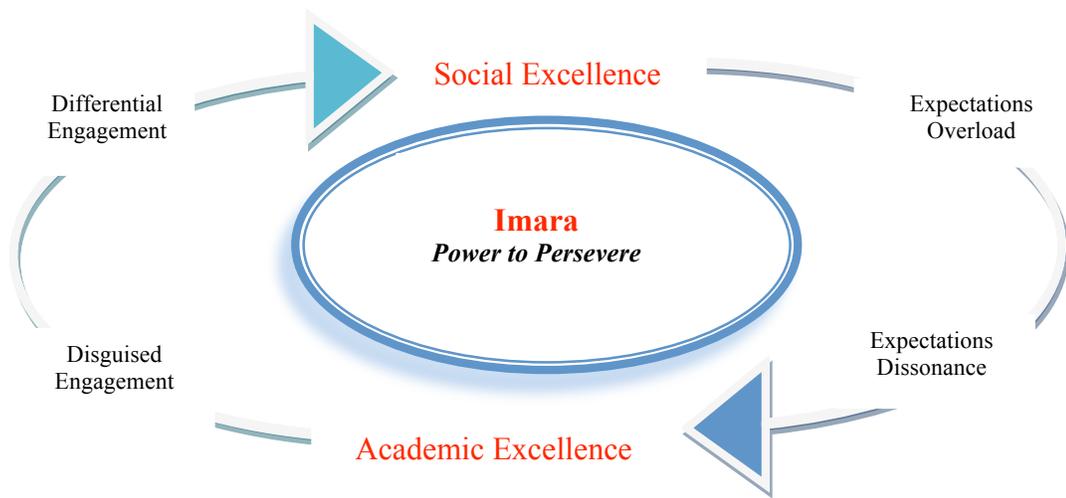
APPENDIX B

Figure 2 – Building African American Males Model



APPENDIX C

Figure 3 – The Imara Cycle



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Research Interests

Urban Education

- Structural causes and solutions to the Urban-Suburban Achievement Gap.
- Classroom management, curriculum, and pedagogical strategies for urban male learners.
- Academic achievement of racial minority students K-Ph.D.

Multicultural Education

- Preparation of White teachers for diverse classrooms.
- Service learning to promote cultural sensitivity and responsiveness among pre service teachers.