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## Contextual Pedagogy: A Praxis Engaging Black Male High School Students Toward Eliminating the Achievement Gap

Timothy Alan Berry  
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Contextual Pedagogy: A Praxis for Engaging Black Male High School Students Toward  
Eliminating the Achievement Gap

By

Timothy Alan Berry

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Educational Doctorate Degree

In

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Contextual Pedagogy: A Praxis for Engaging Black Male High School Students Toward  
Eliminating the Achievement Gap

Timothy Alan Berry

This dissertation has been examined and approved by the following members of the  
student's committee.

Dr. Scott Wurdinger, Advisor

Dr. Candace Raskin, Committee Member

Professor Dominic Taylor, Committee Member

## **Abstract**

Problems facing black male students in K-12 education are as multiple as they are complex. Regarding this issue, the research literature revealed three major themes that came to the foreground: 1) the lack of school engagement, 2) academic achievement gaps, and 3) racism. In response, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the contextual pedagogical influences of Project-Based Learning (PBL) on school engagement, creativity, and problem solving for fourteen black male students in a suburban Minnesota high school. The methodology for this was an instrumental case study (i.e., seeking understanding of phenomena beyond the case itself). Findings in this case revealed that the PBL process in several ways engaged black males. Critical Race Theory combined with contextual pedagogic practice was found to be vital to engaging these students. This study indicated that educators would benefit by examining how to define achievement of black males in light of antiracist teaching practices to foster more opportunities for them to succeed. There was no disruptive behavior observed during the PBL sessions. However, the issue of racial disparity in school suspensions did surface during the study, leading toward discourse about antiracist teaching practice, and policy for school leaders. More research is needed to explore how these approaches can work within the structure of public schools.

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## Preface

In the fall of 1975, I was 8 years old and about to enter the second grade. My school day began on a hot September day at William Penn Elementary School in Northeast Minneapolis. This year was to be like no other in the city's history. By law, Minneapolis began to implement the desegregation of its public schools. This was due to such landmark court cases as *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971). That first day of school in 1975 was emblematic of a trajectory that radically changed the course of public education for teachers, students, and entire communities across the nation.

I grew up in the "north side" of Minneapolis, as it's still referred to today. Then, and now, it is predominately African American. In the mid-1950s, my parents left the south in search of better opportunities in the north. They were also fleeing Jim Crow laws that plagued them in Texas. My parents were very excited for me to go to school with other second graders that did not live in our neighborhood, and to demonstrate that I was as smart as any other student my age, white or black. As I was getting ready to board the bus, my parents told me I would do well and excel as I had in my former school that was a block away from our house. I had attended John Hay Elementary up until desegregation took effect in Minneapolis.

The long bus ride to school had an air of excitement for me, along with friends from my neighborhood. When we arrived at school, there was a big crowd that was gathering across the street from the school. My mom had mentioned that there would be a lot of people watching because it was such a major event in civil rights history. During the first day, the teachers seemed very nice; they welcomed new students in their classrooms. I noticed that my friends and I were not in the same classroom. As a means to assure myself, I looked forward to recess

and going home together on the same bus. At the time, I didn't think anything of it. I now realize how socially and culturally isolating it was because I was separated from familiar faces.

At the end of the day, students were loading onto their busses. As this was happening, I noticed that the crowd had grown considerably from earlier that morning. When I took my seat, a brick smashed through the window in front of me. I looked out the window with fear in my eyes and saw the crowd converging on the bus. They had more bricks, sticks, and signs in their hands. It was complete chaos. The bus driver told us to get down as he started to pull off and speed away from the mob. Some kids cried while others yelled in terror.

This brick incident is etched in my mind, even though it happened 37 years ago; that memory has continued to shape my life in profound ways—many times not on a conscious level. Eventually, through a long and circuitous route, this event, in part, led me to this dissertation topic. Before that day, I felt really good about myself. However, when that brick smashed through the bus window, it shook my foundation, fracturing me in ways that affected my self-esteem and how I perceived teachers' attitudes toward me. I began to question if teachers were interested in my learning.

The next several years brought about many startling discoveries about schools and my place in them. That brick was not just something an angry mob threw. Rather, psychologically, it made me realize that school was not a safe space. Desegregation's intent was to make public education more equitable for black students. Ironically, what it actually revealed was the ugliness and racial turmoil of the time.

Four decades ago, the brick that was hurled at me was a way to remind all black students that we were the "Other"; we were trespassers in a public school because it was a *white* public school. In spite of that brick, I managed to do well until around sixth grade. In middle

school, I had teachers, such as my seventh grade social studies teacher, who ignored the class and gave us crossword puzzles and other worksheets with trivial games every day, just to pass the time. My ninth grade math teacher had a very difficult time connecting with me and other black male students. She was never available to help us understand the work and when we did poorly, seemed unconcerned with our learning. It eventually became so bad that in ninth grade, I had a 1.9 grade point average and harbored a healthy distrust in school.

However, by the time I reached high school, I had teachers that shaped my path in profound ways: my football coach, who also taught history; my choir teacher; my eleventh grade English teacher; and my tenth grade biology teacher. I now realize that these teachers taught “out of the box” in order to create a bridge to learning and to empower me to strive for excellence in my schooling.

It was the impact these teachers had on me that helped me to succeed in school and motivated me to become a performing artist and educator. As an educator, I realize how essential connected teaching is because it truly changed the course of my educational path. Ironically, that brick was one of the catalysts that propelled me to write this dissertation. The topic of this dissertation is praxis to engage black males in high school. Unfortunately, unlike my high school experience of highly effective, imaginative, and engaged teachers, such examples do not represent the norm for many black male students. In fact, as this dissertation will address, students of color continue to fall further behind.

What will follow is a study that critically examines the lives of other black students nearly 40 years later in another public school system in Minnesota. Focusing on black male high school students, this study allowed me to research teaching practices that could potentially make a difference in their lives, and of so many other young men in our public educational system.

As I write these opening pages, they unfold as a personal narrative. I arrived at this dissertation topic because I saw myself in these students so many years ago. Thus, the inspiration for this topic is personal because it is drawn from my own story. Now well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I question what strides have been made since busing was instituted. Has the education of African American's really changed for the better as this act was supposed to help insure? There is so much at stake as lost generations of black students, particularly black males, continue with unprecedented frequency to be disproportionately disciplined and expelled from school when compared to their white counterparts. With this type of public school practice and history, predictably so, high school graduation rates for black males are appalling. In the state of Minnesota, they rank as one of the worst in the nation; the "dis-education" of black males continues. While our schools empty, our prisons fill with these young men.

For me, this dissertation was a way to find a solution to the disengagement of black males in our public schools. My hope is to heal some of the systemic disparities that exist in so many of our public schools across this state and this nation by using my personal narrative to fuel meaningful critical inquiry.

## Chapter One – Introduction

### Background of the Problem

The problems facing black male students in K-12 education are as multiple as they are complex. Regarding this issue, three major themes come to the foreground: 1) the lack of school engagement, 2) academic achievement gaps, and 3) racism. Black males are scoring lower on tests and are generally receiving lower grades than other students. They are also more likely to be suspended and dropout of school (Skiba et al., 2011).

According to the Schott Foundation Report (Holzman, 2010), high school graduation rates for black students are hovering around 47% nationally, which is problematic for pedagogic practice and its effectiveness in engaging such students in significant ways. For the past several years, educators and entire school districts have struggled with ways to help close the achievement gap between white students and black students. This gap continues to fuel discussion. For example, in many school districts across the country, the achievement gap is the focus of workshops and strategic planning.

This dissertation journey is in part autobiographical for me. As a black male who grew up in K-12 public education, I have personally experienced the phenomena discussed in this study from a number of perspectives, including student, teacher, and parent. This study will be a culmination of what I have felt on a personal level from all three perspectives and my desire to carry the narrative further. It is important that I give examples from my lived experience as I provide background for this topic. As a direct result of my experience, I have an acknowledged bias in determining key areas in both the background of the problem and in what steps may be necessary in the conceptual model for the study. However, because my conceptual framework is

grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), it is appropriate to state what my biases are and why I have them.

In the search for solutions to the achievement gap, there are several identifiable factors that have contributed to this issue. Examining these factors more closely may determine why black males under-achieve when compared to other students. What follows is a synopsis of key issues that afflict black males in our education system.

**Disparity.** According to recent studies, black males are two to three times more likely to be referred for disciplinary action or suspended from school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2009). Research has suggested that these patterns may further disengage them from the learning process (Skiba et al., 2011). The Minnesota Department of Education found a nearly 3:1 disproportion in suspensions of black students compared to white students, even though black students made up just 9% of the student population in the public schools. The report also indicated that similar disparities exist in the graduation rates for black students.

The Schott Foundation (Holzman, 2010) reported that the gap in graduation rates between black males and white males was 28%. In Minnesota, the rate was 59% for black males and 88% for white males. This report covered all 50 states and found that of the 10 best performing states for black males, New Jersey was the most significant because of its relative population ratio of black males to white males. It was the only state with a significant black male enrollment and greater than 65% black male graduation rate. Maine, North Dakota, New Hampshire, Vermont, Idaho, South Dakota, Iowa, Montana, and Utah were the other best performing states for black males. However, their black male enrollment is significantly lower than New Jersey.

Crime and punishment statistics are very similar in terms of how many black men are

incarcerated per capita compared to whites. Coley and Barton (2006) found that there were more white men than black men in the United States, and 0.7% of white men were incarcerated while 4.7% of black men were incarcerated. This disparity has its roots in post-slavery southern law and its labor practices. As slaves were emancipated, lawmakers in the south enacted new laws targeting black men. One such law was vagrancy, which made it illegal for black men to be seen in public without being able to prove their employment status. Furthermore, the punishments for those violations were far more severe for black males than they were for any white person arrested for the same crime. This was discussed in detail in a recent documentary on Public Television, "Slavery by Another Name," based on the 2009 book by Douglas Blackmon.

The disparity in sentencing continues in today's practices. It seems to be a deep seeded phenomenon in the psyche of our culture. In summary, there are statistics in school suspension rates, prison populations, arrests, and punishment that suggest black males are more often given greater consequences than whites even when the violation was the same. Part of the growing concern is that statistically, black males have a better chance of going to jail than graduating from high school (Rocques & Paternoster, 2011).

**Inequitable funding and school choices.** School choice and equal access to education for black students has been an integral topic for the nation's schools since before the Supreme Court struck down segregation in 1954. As the nation wrestled with school integration, it also had to deal with the inequity of learning materials and learning conditions. For example, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the court decided separate was inherently unequal. This included the lack of adequate textbooks in black schools, which had a major impact on learning for black students. These factors along with the development of standardized tests laid the foundation to track the achievements of students (Green, 2010). There was a gap in the quality

of education between black and white students to begin with, and as referenced earlier, that gap remains.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) was signed into law as an attempt to rectify some of the achievement gaps by providing more choice and equity in resources for students of color. NCLB was not directed at just students of color, but all students who were identified as at-risk academically. However, students of color seemed to be the primary population. One of the solutions to the challenge of NCLB was the promotion of charter schools and open enrollment to foster more competitions between school districts.

According to some studies, public charter schools have taken resources away from traditional public schools. In some cities, public funds that would have gone to traditional public schools have shifted to support charters (Buras, 2009). In addition, charter schools have not proven to be equitable in their admission policies; inequities in funding have led to unequal choices for many black male students. The push for charters is strong and was bolstered by the film, *Waiting for Superman*, which was released in 2010. In this film about a charter school started in Harlem, New York, data was used to connect names and faces of black students with the lack of achievement. Its premise is that more funding and attention is needed to help eliminate the gaps between black and white students are supported by researchers; however, charter schools have mixed results for academic achievement (Barr, Sadovnik, & Visconti, 2006). In other words, some charters perform better than public schools and some perform worse.

Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2011) reported that charter schools in many states and large metropolitan areas have shown increasing evidence of racial segregation. White students showed an over-representation in charter schools; therefore, there were inequities in terms of racial demographics for schools in the study. The same study reported that achievement



results were mixed. The researchers suggested that data about the services provided to low income and non-English speaking students were incomplete. According to Swalwell and Apple (2011), effective public schools performed just as well in terms of achievement when compared with charter schools.

Another major factor for equitable school funding and choice for black boys is declining enrollment in some urban areas. The combination of more school choices and less school age children can be problematic because some urban schools can no longer afford to stay open. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, the decision has been made to close several public schools due to low student enrollment over the past few years (Johnson & Shah, 2010). According to the Minneapolis Public Schools website, the district administrators are considering very difficult decisions about whether or not to close a once prominent high school in northern Minneapolis. Some of the students affected by this phenomenon are busing to schools in suburban districts. Even though there are seemingly more choices from which black males can choose to go to school, fewer of these schools are in the neighborhoods where they live.

Equity and racial discrimination in education. The history of public education for black students in the United States dates to the founding of state-run public schools during Reconstruction in the 1870s (Green, 2010). From the start, these schools were segregated by race. The schools were run by states that had just lost the right to own the students who would attend school and receive a free education. As a result of the still tense and racially charged beliefs in the south, the schools often lacked the same quality and care that white schools enjoyed. Under Jim Crow laws there were dilapidated, broken down buildings, poorly conditioned textbooks, or no books at all in many cases, and unequal funding for resources.

The legal segregation of schools by race was bolstered by the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896, which required “separate but equal” as a legal practice in the use of public facilities. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* helped to change the separate but equal policy for public education, paving the way for school integration. It was believed that black students would achieve as well as white students, once given the same access to school facilities, books, and resources.

Although *Brown v. Board of Education* laid the foundation for integration, it took other decisions to force the issue. *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971) made busing an integral part of desegregation. Black students were bused to predominately white schools in order to facilitate equality in education. Although the ruling propelled school districts toward dealing with the problem of segregation, many whites and the neighborhoods where their schools were located did not receive it very well.

I have direct knowledge of the impact of this phenomenon. In 1975, as a second grade student, I was bused from my neighborhood to a predominately white school in Northeast Minneapolis. The first day of school presented a sobering reminder of the legacy in racism and inequality. At school that day, there was a huge crowd looking on as we arrived. After school, the crowd had grown. As I boarded the bus and sat down, a brick crashed through the window in front of me, landing on the seat. The bus driver sped away as fast as he could. My life changed forever that day, and it serves as my motivation to carry this discussion about black boys forward. I have briefly discussed my own story in more detail in the preface of this dissertation.

Discrimination in today’s public education system can be hard to quantify and prove due to resistance from school districts. However, examining school policies is a starting place to uncovering the existence of racial bias. Black males make up a smaller percentage of K-12

student enrollments, yet represent the majority of discipline referrals, school suspensions (Losen, 2011), low achievement scores on tests, and low graduation rates (Schott Foundation Report, 2010). At issue may not only be systemic policies, but also teaching practices that have inherent biases toward black males in school.

The systemic issue in question for teaching practice has to do with whiteness and white hegemony. Like race, whiteness is a social construct (Omi & Winant, 1994). At the center of this construct is white privilege, a social structure that protects a hierarchy that promotes white hegemony. It is important to note that the discrimination and bias may be a larger institutional problem. Considering the racial and historical context and tenants of public education and who made the governing decisions about school policy and teaching practices, one can argue that this power structure continues to be perpetuated.

Glenn Singleton (2006) described racism in the United States as the systemic perpetuation of white supremacy. In this system, race is the construct by which people are categorized for the purpose of ranking; it is used to justify positions of power. Power can be measured by economic and political influence on public policy. Views of racism vary from it being an individual pathology to racism being a systemic problem (Young, 2011). Acts of racism can be made by those who act as conscious perpetrators or unconscious perpetrators. Conscious perpetrators knowingly and purposefully engage in racist intents and behaviors. Unconscious perpetrators do not knowingly engage, but do not make intentional decisions to act against racism.

Some educational leaders in Young's study (2011) thought that to be racist, one had to cross the line from prejudiced thought to discriminatory action. The potential to misunderstand the difference between individual vs. systemic racism is a factor in how educators view solving

problems in which race plays a role. Further complicating this issue is what Young described as the deceived perpetrator/activist and enlightened perpetrator/activist. The example above implies that in this unconscious perpetration lies white privilege.

White privilege is fueled by its relative invisibility. To reverse this privilege and move toward anti-racist educational practice, educators must make whiteness visible and centralize whites as the dominant group (Blackwell, 2010). To help students in dismantling racism, they must be taught that white is a color, too.

A current trend in education to help address the equity problem, especially in districts near urban centers, is to establish equity coordinators and/or programs for equity/diversity education. These programs often feature administrators, teachers, and staff working together to solve some of the disparities that impact black students and students of color, in general. One of the responsibilities that some districts have given to these teams is to establish protocol for processing concerns for students of color. Tasks ranging from monitoring school policies, reviewing attendance records, and checking test scores to see what disparities are present for students of color are also all a part of what equity coordinators are charged with doing.

Achievement gap. Standardization allows us to keep track of how well students are performing based on test scores. Schools have had debates over several decades about how to best measure what students are learning. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, later reauthorized as NCLB (2001), has led to efforts to uniformly test the nation's students. Standardization has a history in other segments of society, too. For example, the Industrial Revolution brought about the assembly line, which standardized the production of automobiles and other technologies. Standardized paper tests were used in the 1960s for voting registration in the South. An example of this was the 1965 Alabama literacy test (Hunt, 1996).

This was particularly important to black voters because they were required to pass this test to vote. The tests were designed in a way to suppress the black vote. As a result of this tactic, it can be argued that blacks have a skeptical view of standardized tests given that at least one form of that type of measurement was designed to keep them from participating in a vital part of larger society.

The gap between black males and other students doesn't only exist in school choice, equity in resources, and school discipline. It is also present in test scores and academic achievement. In just about every measurable analysis, black males are behind. One example is the gap in gifted and talent designations and special education. Black males are overwhelmingly slated for special education (Hall, 2009), while white students are more likely to be placed in gifted and talented programs (Loftis, 2010).

The divide in academic achievement is manifested in a growing gap in graduation rates. This will be covered in more detail in Chapter Two. According to the Schott Foundation Report (2010), with current trends, many states in the U.S. are moving toward a 28% to 29% graduation gap.

Engagement implications for black males. All of the aforementioned factors have potential implications for why black males disengage from school. Once they experienced flawed and repeated disciplinary actions, such as suspension, black students exhibited a negative attitude toward their school experience. According to Rocques and Paternoster (2011), as a result of such attitudinal shifts, black male students may begin to disengage as early as elementary school. Further, Rocques and Paternoster linked the disengagement of black students in school to their imprisonment later in life, or what they termed in the title of their study as "school-to-jail" (p. 1).

They identified one factor that may be at the root of the issue: the disproportionate discipline referrals of black students when compared to white students.

Another cause for investigation is teaching pedagogy. Charbeneau (2009) suggested that teaching practices often encourage white hegemony. Teaching practices in the traditional sense have largely relied on segmenting subjects into the school day, which is how students experience content. This practice creates a compartmentalization of knowledge and learning. A typical day might include classes broken up into subjects such as math, science, social studies, English, and arts. This approach is in part fueled by standardization.

One major impasse for educators is the pressure for students to perform well on state standardized achievement tests (Herrera, 2002). The decision for many educators has become whether to teach to the test or to teach students content that will deepen their understanding. This issue has been exacerbated, in part, by NCLB (2001). It has also created conflict among teachers because they know “teaching to the test” compromises *any* student’s learning.

In order to deal with such disparities in test scores and other inequities, there have been a number of educational philosophies birthed over the past three decades. The multicultural model is one of them. Some scholars point to the work of James Banks as the foundation for the multicultural movement (Branch, 2005). Banks (2004) used a framework that has five dimensions of multicultural education. He described the five dimensions of multicultural education as: (1) content integration, (2) the knowledge construction process, (3) prejudice reduction, (4) equity pedagogy, and (5) empowering school culture and social structure (p. 20-23). Banks’ framework was a pathway to not only help black males, but also all persons of color in a given classroom.

Molefi Asanti (1987) pioneered an educational philosophy known as Afrocentric education to specifically engage African Americans. The Afrocentric idea espouses that learning for all students who share African lineage should be maintained through an African-based cultural lens. The implication is that students learn philosophy, history, and culture from an African perspective. This model has a core foundational belief that to engage students of African descent, teachers need to use “object-specific” and “subject-specific” lessons that feature African-based modalities, learning styles, and cultural traditions important to the edifying of African peoples. There are some schools that use this framework as a way to engage black boys. One of the tenants of the Afrocentric model is the belief that students will be more engaged and motivated because they learn about themselves racially and culturally (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009). The academic achievement of the males in these types of programs has positive results, but is limited to small sampling numbers.

Project-based learning. Project-based learning is when students become active participants in designing their own learning experiences. Involving students in their own learning helps them meet their educational goals and objectives. At the center of the process is the learner. In the book *Passion for Learning: How Project-Based Learning Meets the Needs of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Students*, Ronald Newell (2003) stated that “project-based learning is personalized with a structure that allows teacher and learner to interact meaningfully” (p. 56). This approach is the antithesis of the banking system, in which the student is regarded as an empty vessel into which knowledge is poured by the teacher (Freire, 1970).

There are many examples of programs that focus on specific philosophies or designs, which students choose because of their interest in certain vocations. Performing arts schools or math and science magnet schools are examples of such programs. In these programs, classes

emphasize a particular focus that sparks student interest as the core strategy for students to learn. Project-based learning is similar to this framework, as students develop their own goals through learning plans (Newell, 2003). Through this approach, students discover what their interests are and pursue their education through their own interests. Inherent in a project-based approach is a process that engages students to think creatively and to problem solve.

Attempts to address the challenges black males face in school have included programs such as Afro-Centric academies, peer group settings, and incentive programs. These types of programs have generally addressed students that do not do well in the traditional settings, have low achievement, and lack school engagement.

One of the ways to address pedagogic implications for black males is *Critical Race Theory*, or CRT. This theory, at its core, is based on Derrick Bell's interest convergence, a principle of the theory that can be used as a tool to explain, analyze, and study policies and practices in teacher education as they converge around race (as described by Milner, 2008). It will be important to keep this lens on the key issues for black males, such as disparity, equity, systemic racism, engagement, and achievement in school.

Black males have a myriad of circumstances, which have led to an increasing rate of disengagement. The lack of engagement is one of the factors for their poor achievement in school. There are a number of pathways to consider for moving toward eliminating this gap. Some avenues to consider for helping black males are policy decisions affecting student disciplinary actions, integration, equitable funding, and culturally-relevant pedagogy. The intent of this investigation is to explore a specific pedagogic approach, exploring the way project-based learning as a form of contextual pedagogy can impact black boys. Although the causes of disengagement are varied, the proposed approach in this study focuses on teaching and learning



and could add to the list of solutions from a pedagogic perspective to the many challenges they face in our educational systems.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the contextual pedagogical influences of project-based learning on school engagement, creativity, and problem solving for black male students at an urban Minnesota high school. There may be implications for positive teacher-student communication and the classroom environment as a safe place for black males, in general.

### **Research Questions**

1. How can contextual pedagogic practice help with the achievement gap of black male students?
2. In what ways does project-based learning as a form of contextual pedagogy engage black males in school?
3. In what ways can project-based learning help to address high suspension rates of black male high school students?

### **Delimitations**

This study was designed for 14 black males in one high school. The sample size is small compared to the largeness of the problem with school engagement. It is limited to facilitate a deeper connection by the researcher into the lives of the students. Moreover, it was the intent to collect in-depth qualitative data about their situations and responses to the pedagogy. The study also focused on classroom pedagogy rather than policy. This is purposeful so as to build possible future guiding principles for practitioners who are in the classroom.

### **Limitations**

The limits of the study are as follows: the class will be delivered to an all-male roster. This is not the type of class situation that students at this school have on a regular basis.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Black.** For the purposes of this dissertation, the term black as a category of color will be used. Due to numerous immigrants from the African diaspora, the term “African American” does not accurately depict the group at the center of the study. Black is a term that many people of African descent in the United States have in some cases accepted, and in most cases, the term is used as a way to foster systemic racism through categorizing people by color. It is inclusive of American born and non-American born persons with African heritage alike.

**African American.** People of African descent who were born in the U.S.

**Contextual Pedagogy.** A teaching practice centered on understanding the context of the students in the classroom, which uses a comprehensive teaching strategy including historical, theoretic, and culturally-relevant information to facilitate student achievement.

**Racism.** Using the social construct of race to foster economic, political, and cultural influence for the purpose of racial discrimination, thus promoting and maintaining a system of white supremacy.

**White Hegemony.** The enactment of teaching practices that perpetuate whiteness, of which white privilege is the foundation.

## Chapter Two – Literature Review

In the review of literature for this study, I have mapped four main headings of concentration: 1) Policy Decisions; 2) Achievement Gap; 3) Pedagogic Practice; and 4) Project-Based Learning. Each heading has several layers of material integral to providing a more thorough literature review.

### **Policy**

For almost the last six decades, lawmakers, educators, and citizens have wrestled with how to deal with the public education of black students. The most important policy decisions directly relating to this study are those impacting school integration, equity, racial diversity, and school discipline.

Horsford (2011) investigated the impact school desegregation policies had on urban education, as well as investigated possible negative consequences of desegregation. In this study, interviews were conducted with eight retired black superintendents who were charged with leading their districts through desegregation. The results of those interviews revealed that even though efforts to desegregate have been vast, schools have struggled to integrate. A significant objective of this study was to investigate the difference between desegregation (which Horsford described as a kind of physical proximity) and integration (a more equal and interpersonal exchange). According to Dunbar (1999), black males are often promised inclusion, yet are excluded by isolation through placement in special education, alternative schools, and after-school programs. Dunbar's results indicated that black males are disproportionately tracked and/or targeted for such programs.

The argument Horsford (2011) made is that despite efforts by some educators post *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), racial isolation and separation are still a part of the landscape for black students. Some of the contributing factors include tracking black students (Chambers,

2009), the isolation caused by removing black males who are viewed as behavioral problems (Noguera, 2008), and the overrepresentation of black males in special education programs (Blanchett, 2006).

Tracking black male students often leads to assigning them to special education classes. Hall (2009), Reynolds (2006), and Jordan and Cooper (2003) all agreed that this practice is very prevalent and leads to an overrepresentation of black males in special education. All three of these studies confirmed that there are a disproportionate number of black males designated as special education students relative to their enrollment in K-12 education. Hall reported that this social construction is, in part, one of the contributing factors in the overrepresentation. Historically, four special education categories were used to explain the failure of minority children. The categories included: slow learners, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and culturally deprived children. A different social construction (learning disabilities) was used to explain the failure of white children (Gresson, 2004).

The point that black males are overrepresented in special education begs the question: Are they underrepresented in gifted and talented programs? According to Loftis (2010), many school districts adopted gifted and talented education (GATE) programs after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) as a balancing tool for special education classification. Beginning in 2000, black students demonstrated a substantially higher percentage of enrollments in special education than any other racial/ethnic group (Anand, Fine, Perkins, & Surry, 2002). Black males seemed to be an increasing number of that percentage. Hall (2009) suggested that in 2003, African Americans made up about 17% of the K-12 student population; black males made up 13% of special education during that time. His argument contended that the policy of tracking black

males by their perceived lack of achievement and/or ability led to isolation and even re-segregation.

School discipline policy closely resembles the other disparities that black males face in school. In reviewing the literature on school suspensions, discipline referrals, and expulsions, it can be argued that they are treated differently when decisions are made about their behavior in schools.

Gregory, Cornell, and Fan (2011) collected data from sample surveys completed by 5,035 ninth grade students. Their study investigated the relationship between school structure and support to suspension rates for black and white students. Two measurements were used in the study. The first was “academic press,” which was determined by students to see if they felt their teachers had a high standard of expectation for them to complete assignments. The second was school structure relative to rules and adherence to them by students. The study compared schools that had high academic press and structure to schools that had low academic press and structure in order to determine if there was any correlation. Their findings revealed that schools with both low levels of support and academic press had the highest suspension rates for blacks and whites, and the highest gap between blacks (28%) and whites (13%). When the suspension rates for whites increased, so did the rates for blacks. There are other questions that may reveal reasons why there is a gap in suspension rates. However, this study indicated that the gap is not due to higher or lower standards in academics or school structure.

According to Rocques and Paternoster (2011), the roles of racial hostility, stereotypes, and cultural differences are partially responsible for why black male students disengage as early as elementary school and later drop out of school before graduation. Their findings included evidence that black students were two times more likely than white students to receive at least

one disciplinary report. Similarly, Skiba et al. (2011) found that African American students were 2.19 times more likely than white students to be referred for behavior violations in elementary school and 3.78 times more likely in middle school. These findings are consistent with findings from the Minnesota Department of Education (2009). Their report found that there were disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates for minority groups compared to white students. It also indicated that similar disparities existed in the graduation rates for the same groups.

Noguera (2003) pointed out the potential danger due to the overrepresentation of black and Latino males in school discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. He found that schools mostly used discipline to punish in the same way as adult institutions did. Punitive policies are meant to ostracize those who are caught offending the community. According to Noguera, in this penal system, the majority of the “offenders” were black and Latino, which caused a negative view and expectation of such students. In addition, those students were likely to dis-engage more often than their white peers. Skiba et al. (2011) agreed with Noguera; they argued that race was not a neutral factor when schools determined how to discipline students, which reflected an “otherness” toward black and Latino students. School discipline policies are at the forefront as one of the leading causes for disengagement by black males (Holzman, 2010; Blackwell, 2010; Noguera, 2008; Landsman, 2004).

There is much information on public school diversity issues like desegregation policies, as presented in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and on unpacking racial identification terms such as “black,” “Latino,” and “people of color.” It is evident that Jordan (2010) agreed with other scholars such as Horsford (2011). This agreement is reflected in both authors’ examinations of the role that desegregation policies played in increasing the achievement gap of African Americans and other racial minority groups. In addition, Jordan found that high stakes

tests might possibly put minority students more at risk in certain ways because they lead to a redefining of equity.

In a recent study on the relationship of charter schools and segregation, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2011) examined charter schools in large metropolitan areas throughout 40 states in the country, including the District of Columbia. In addition, the researchers examined school choice and its relationship to equity and segregation. By viewing several federal studies on charter school enrollment and case studies over the past 15 years, the study reported growing evidence of segregation in charter schools. According to the article, there was an over representation of white students in charter schools. Another component to the study involved looking at achievement of students in those schools. The researchers suggested that data about the services provided to low income and non-English speaking students was incomplete. Conclusions from the study indicated that there is a growing consensus in current scholarship that charter schools are creating more school choice, but the choices are not equitable ones for black students.

A counter argument for charter schools as equitable choices was made in the 2010 film, *Waiting for Superman*. This film features Jeffrey Canada and his work in Harlem, New York, with black children; here, he gives them the chance to succeed through his charter school program. He indicated that students that go through his program perform better in school. Swalwell and Apple (2011) evaluated the film in terms of its documentary status and suggested that larger conversations should happen as a result of viewing the film. They questioned the film as a documentary and disputed some of the film's claims. For example, they suggested that the film was really a tool to promote an anti-union, pro-charter school agenda. They examined the film's narrative and compared it to other scholarship regarding effective public school vs. charter

school successes. According to their research, effective public schools were comparable to charter schools. Swalwell and Apple (2011) contended that the film paints a picture that is counter to what some research indicates. The researchers concluded that to start larger discussions, viewers need to understand that the film has a biased point of view and hinders efforts to discuss real problems and solutions in public school education. According to the article, the film's key supporters and financial backing all come from pro-charter school persons, such as Bill Gates.

The effort to find an approach for better engaging black males through policy has yielded some useful information. Based on the research thus far, it has provided a pathway toward helping to formulate a foundation for this study. In order to set the study intended to complete in motion, policy is viewed as one of the pillars of necessary background for educational systems' impacts on black boys.

### **Achievement Gap**

For black leaders over the past century and a half, equality was a steady theme in the fight for civil rights. Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few, have all contributed to these efforts. More recently, and specific to education, Pedro Noguera (2008), James Banks (2009), Molefi Asante (1987), Glenn Singleton (2007), and Jawanza Kunjufu (2005) have shed light on a growing need to address the inequities that black students still face.

In the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision, a foundation was laid for a separate but equal opportunity for blacks and whites in the United States. That law was found to be flawed through the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Recent studies indicate that educators need to examine the issues surrounding equality as we move forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina provided an opportunity to examine how school funding intersects with integration. Buras (2009) conducted a study specifically to investigate how the disinvestment of urban public schools affects such students of color. This study was completed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Using a collection of student writings, interviews with students and teachers, and community and classroom observations, the first goal was to determine if there was a counter story to what was communicated to the general public. The second goal was to comment on such reforms as the building of more charter schools, which may have been inspired by the concept of racial equity and integration. The subjects in this study were from *Students at the Center* (an independent program) and New Orleans Public Schools. Buras' study was titled, "We Have to Tell Our Story: Neo-Griots, Racial Resistance, and Schooling in the Other South."

Evidenced in writings from students most affected, Buras' study suggested that there were events and procedures that made it much more difficult for students in urban areas to find a school, causing greater racial segregation. The difficulty that students and families found was that charter schools could be very selective in their admittance criteria, which often times excluded black students because of interest, location, and mobility.

The Schott Foundation (Holzman, 2010) reported that one of the underlying causes to the gap in tests scores and graduation rates for black males may be inequitable funding for schools with high populations of students of color. Many schools located in urban areas have overcrowded classrooms (Gaither, 2009). Class size is interconnected to funding. Results for a majority of black students in such school settings were negative in terms of student outcomes (Cokley, 2006; Wilson, 1996).

Jordan (2010) sought to examine the issue of equity by examining student learning outcomes. He specifically focused on whether or not these outcomes were distributed randomly across race. Moreover, he looked at assessments, such as those used in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to critically examine if they accurately measured the types of learning that were necessary for social and economic success. The methodology used in this study included an examination of multiple perspectives and approaches for analyzing outcomes in education for diverse learners. Braun, Chapman, and Vezzu (2010) agreed with Jordan. Their analysis of data related to test accountability mandated in NCLB found no measurable improvements for African American students. They studied 10 states' data from the years 2000-2007. States used in the study were selected based on relative black student population (together they enrolled half of all black students in the United States) and their varying approaches to education reform. The results concluded that having high stakes state tests has not helped to eliminate the achievement gap between black and white students.

Another way the achievement gap has been viewed by researchers is in terms of the theory behind it. Madyun (2011) used Social Disorganization Theory to explain the gap between black and white students. Using the theory developed by Shaw and McKay (1942), Madyun explained the interconnected factors of Social Disorganization Theory as: 1) family composition (p.24); 2) residential mobility (p. 24); 3) racial diversity (p.25); and 4) poverty (p. 25). These four factors illustrate certain dangers that might be present for African American students that exacerbate their ability and/or desire to fully engage in school. Therefore, it was harder for black students to engage and be successful when any or all of the four factors were compromised.

Chamber's study (2009) investigated the usage of the term "achievement gap" and how, by definition, it disadvantages black students by its negative connotation. The relationship

between racial gaps in academic achievement correlated to tracking black students toward educational pathways with low expectations while their white counter parts were moved into classes with high expectations. The preference for Chambers would have been to use the term “receivment” to describe what opportunities black males are given as opposed to what they do or do not achieve.

Noguera (2008) used the accountability intimated in the NCLB (2002) language as proof that the government officials are no longer attributing the gaps in achievement to some inherent intellectual disadvantage that black students have, as would have been the case in the past, especially in the south. He suggested that because the language in such documents references all students learning, it points toward teachers needing to use better pedagogic strategies to ensure that all students can learn. Omni and Winant (1986) were at the forefront of advancing the idea that race is a social construct and it should be considered as such by educators.

It is this point that fueled Noguera’s study in 2008 (mentioned above). He examined two districts in New York with disparities in achievement; each district had its own approach for trying to solve the problem. Noguera’s findings suggested that one of the districts saw the problem as political pressure to act. As a result, it developed a distrust of some of its students and parents, which also impacted teachers’ attitudes about new teaching strategies. The second school district saw the problem as one that, collectively, the district should take on. They developed a school integration plan where the children in the district moved together in each grade level through high school. According to the results, when comparing the two districts at the end of the study, the second school performed better than the first in closing the gap, although the distance between black and white students in both districts was still considerable.

Noguera noted that the attitude of the second district, with the commitment they made to solve the problem, showed promise.

Levine and Marcus (2007) observed how two groups of teachers developed collaborative teaching strategies to help with their district's academic gap. They reported that by having such collaboration, multiple trajectories of teacher learning might be possible. The kind of trajectories noted by this research through the observation of teacher conversations and interventions were as follows below.

The first trajectory of learning was teacher collaboration (p. 128). Teachers in this study were willing to share ideas and ask questions among themselves as how best to handle the circumstances in any given day in the classroom. The second trajectory of teacher learning was promoting school-family partnership (p. 130). Noted in the study was that family and parental involvement were viewed as important parts of student success. Secondary teachers tend to see themselves as subject area specialists and do not contact parents unless there is a problem with a class; generally, they do not regard parents as a resource, also supported by Epstein (2001). In this observation, teachers wanted to learn how to engage families in a new way. The third trajectory of teacher learning was instructional modification for ELL students (p.132). Modifying tests as a team and building a common vocabulary were the key discussion points of the conversations with teachers relative to ELL. Overall, these trajectories did not point to an end, but rather, to a need for continued research on the challenges and interests of teachers to use collaboration as a way to close achievement gaps.

The review of literature around the academic achievement gap serves as a second pillar of background in order to inform my study. This review helps to point toward the practices educators and scholars have tried in closing the gap.

## **Pedagogic Practice**

In viewing teaching practices on college campuses, Charbeneau (2009) offered 18 college professors information from previous data that identified certain practices that fostered and reinforced whiteness. She encouraged them to try changing their teaching practices to be more inclusive for non-white students. The findings in this study revealed that it was not in these professors' best interests to alter their teaching practices. Their resistance suggested a larger systemic issue in academia.

Denevi and Pastan (2006) suggested that teachers need to learn antiracist practices by attending conferences and committing to practices that foster better understanding of the role white privilege plays in schools and in the classroom. In their research, Denevi and Pastan explained how they attended a conference where author and anti-racist educator Tim Wise presented. His model for anti-racist practice is based on his founding of the group Association for White Anti-Racist Education (AWARE), in which white educators must first acknowledge their privilege before moving forward in any meaningful way in terms of culturally-relevant teaching practice.

In another study on Whiteness, Chubbuck (2005) stated:

Few white teachers would use the word “racist” to describe their attitudes and actions toward students of color or the curricular and structural components of the educational system; racism contradicts American ideals of egalitarianism and offends the moral sensibilities of most white people. (p. 302)

This study examined the paradox of two white secondary English teachers trying to understand and better engage African American and other ethnic groups while disrupting their whiteness. In order to deeply examine this issue, each participant constructed their own meaning of how their

personal identities intersected with race and whiteness. She found that this was a complex issue because even though the teachers were aware of their privilege, their good intentions toward black students did not always match their pedagogic practice. In other words, teachers could not recognize that they were the product of privilege and how such “status” had the potential to disconnect them from educating students of other ethnic groups. The next paragraphs offer some possible reasons for these findings.

Mudimbe (1988) argued that even in the continent of Africa, the entire column of knowledge or “gnosis” from people of African descent is based on Western epistemology. The book, *Beyond The Big House* (Ladson-Billings, 2005), also illustrated a similar phenomenon in terms of African American teachers having to assimilate into the academy in order to not disrupt the status quo of white hegemonic school practices. Systemically, U.S. education is based on a dominant, white patriarchal paradigm. Because this country is steeped in this paradigm, professionally, black educators have to adopt strategies that are in-line with dominant, white views.

According to Cooper (2002), nine out of 10 teachers in America are white. This study asked the question: Does the race of the teacher matter? Cooper found that successful black teachers practiced culturally relevant teaching:

Effective teachers of black children (1) are committed to the black community and provide a sense of family, (2) promote positive racial identity, (3) help students to succeed in school endeavors, despite the racist nature in both the institution and society in general, by using alternative instructional methods when necessary, (4) take personal responsibility for their students learning, (5) know

their subject matter, and, (6) are demanding of students in all areas, including curriculum and discipline. (p. 52)

White teachers who were successful in teaching black children shared many of these same characteristics with a few exceptions, such as the ability to use both Standard English in school and familial terms when necessary. The white teachers who shared these traits also had the distinction of what Cooper described as being independent of the white hegemonic, Western epistemological framework, which is unconscious. Furthermore, this framework prohibits the teacher from taking a black student's point of view.

The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970), offered some insight on teaching students who are often systemically marginalized. Some of the foundations of critical pedagogy are to put the student at the center of the teaching and learning by offering them a voice in the classroom that is a safe space for them. Freire stated that:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (p. 54)

He further stated:

Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress. (p. 178)

The work of Freire, Banks, and others cited in this chapter centers on what some educators refer to as culturally responsive pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is carried out when teachers show the ability to address the cultural needs of students through cultural knowledge, skills, and predispositions (Majors, 2010; Siwatu, 2007). Several school districts have provided professional development around culturally responsive teaching strategies to help alleviate the cultural gap. Urban school districts educate a growing number of racially and ethnically diverse students (Tillman, 2005), yet a majority of teachers are white. Majors (2010) found that beginning teachers are not prepared for culturally responsive teaching.

Bondima (2004) observed that teachers who were effective in culturally-responsive pedagogy had the ability to cross cultural borders to implement a curriculum that incorporated both the students' expectations of their teachers and the teachers' expectations of their students. Other scholars sharing this view include Delpit (1995) and Singleton and Linton (2007). West (1993) suggested that race matters in the conversations we have, and in order to progress toward pluralism, we must become multi-contextual, which leads towards multiculturalism. One issue that West described was not recognizing the reality of race in the way he prescribes, which may lead to explosive consequences. When referring to the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, West stated: "What happened in Los Angeles in April of 1992 was neither a race riot nor a class rebellion. Rather, this monumental upheaval was a multiracial, trans-class, and largely male display of justified social rage" (p. 3).

Wright (2011), in a review of successful elementary, middle, and high schools in urban areas, suggested that inquiry or active learning strategies such as project-based learning had positive results for African American student achievement, particularly in science and math. Similarly, findings for the achievement of African American students were reported by Gay (2000), Emdin (2010), and Moses (2001).



In an analysis of 32 schools in urban districts, Foote and Cook-Cottone (2004) conducted a field experience survey of teachers to look at placement practices for teachers preparing to teach in urban areas. Their hope was to find something that could provide insight and change. Part of their study concluded that teachers in low income or poverty areas had less education than teachers in more affluent areas. For example, the former were less likely to hold a master's degree. The results revealed that cooperating teachers who participated in the study felt that observational field experiences were more valuable and that the experiences should be developmental in nature. They also felt that the site needed strong administrative support and teachers who demonstrated quality practices.

Cousins, Mickelson, Williams, and Velasco (2008) surveyed students and families in an urban district and invited them to participate in a community-school collaborative effort to promote parental involvement. They administered a pre- and post-study survey to analyze how the students and parents responded to the program. Their findings suggested that all the stakeholders thought it was important to build the partnerships. However, there were many challenges to effectively build alliances between teachers, students, community organizations, and schools. Time was one of the challenges, as it was difficult to schedule activities aimed at improving student academic performance when all the stakeholders were available. This study also found that in many instances, African American parents were not as aware of educational processes as white parents were. They inherently learned along with their children as they navigated through the school system. This approach was similar to what Jeffrey Canada discovered through his charter school program in Harlem, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In searching for pedagogic practices that better suit black males, the work of Afrocentric scholar, Molefi Asanti (1987), becomes relevant. His Afrocentric idea espoused that all classroom and learning environments for black males should be based on African culture. In a recent study, McDougal (2009) conducted one-on-one interviews with black male high school students to determine what their preferences were for learning. The results were that a majority of the students felt that the way teachers used language was important; they preferred language they could relate to. Students also preferred a hands-on approach where teachers showed them how to do things rather than telling them how to do an assignment. Finally, they wanted to know that what they were learning had real world applications. Those students responded well to a holistic approach to learning, and according to McDougal, could benefit from a problem-based approach.

Other articles that touch upon prescriptive pedagogy for black males and/or African American students include: Allen and Boykin (1992), who noted that contextual factors combined with postulated cultural experiences can influence cognitive performance of African American children; Stewart (2004), who suggested that Afrocentric interventions, such as rites of passage programs, may benefit African American children; and Verharen (2000), who developed curriculum around the Afrocentric curricular tenants of Afrocentrist Molefi Asanti. Further, Graham and Erwin (2011) conducted a phenomenological study of eleventh grade African American males to examine their perceptions of the teaching profession as a viable career path. Results suggested that the boys' attitudes toward becoming teachers were largely shaped by their perceptions of the negative treatment they received as students. In his case, all of the participants had a GPA of 3.0 or higher and were generally performing well academically. In their interviews, black males expressed that schools were oppressive to them and did not value their

experiences. According to the data, they had no desire to come back into such institutions once they completed high school, or anytime in the future.

The practices, attitudes, and studies on how to best educate black males vary. It has been exhaustive in its attempt to determine the practices that work. Evidenced in the scholarship on practice was the need to find a culturally relevant approach to teaching black males. This review has helped point me toward a specific pedagogic practice that I would like to explore: namely, Project-Based Learning.

### **Project-based Learning**

The roots of project-based learning (PBL) in the United States can be attributed to the work of John Dewey (1938). According to Dewey's concept, students generate ideas and plans for their learning for practical use in real world situations. This approach to learning is experiential and incorporates a high degree of problem solving as a core element of the theory.

Newell (2003) stated: "The project-based process is inherently a personalized process, yet one with a structure that allows for advisor and learner to interact meaningfully" (p. 56). The impact of PBL has been to help improve schools by inspiring and motivating students to learn and engage more in the process (Newell, 2003; Blumenfield, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991; Wurdinger & Rudolph, 2009). Students have more of an opportunity to be active learners and can plan and test information. Grant and Branch (2005) reported that middle school students reflected individual differences, system knowledge, domain knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge in the artifacts of their learning as evidenced by the projects they presented. According to their study, some students were not ready for learning how to learn because of a heavy, didactic, teacher directed approach they had been immersed in for most of their educational history. Furthermore, they suggested that students experience more cross-

disciplinary lessons and team teaching so that they can observe the use of knowledge in multiple content areas.

PBL has been tried as an approach to learning in a growing number of schools. Dakota Meadows Middle School in Mankato, MN, introduced PBL into mainstream classrooms (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Bezon, 2007). They found that teachers had a weak understanding of the definition of PBL, but that students were highly engaged in the process. EdVisions Inc. helps schools integrate PBL into their curriculums (Wurdinger, 2012). Minnesota New Country School (MNCS), a charter school, is one of the sites EdVisions started. The students at MNCS choose, develop, and present their own projects with an advisor. Additionally, several studies point to a growing interest in the potential benefits of PBL (Lin & Hsiao, 2002; Wurdinger & Rudolph, 2009; Blumenfield et al., 1991; Grant & Branch, 2005; Newell, 2003).

Some educators who use the foundation philosophy of tying together science, engineering, technology, and math (STEM) have reported positive results of the active learning components of PBL (Verma, Dickerson, & McKinney, 2011; Wright, 2011). Verma, Dickerson, and McKinney reported that educators have been designing, using, and writing about PBL for more than 20 years. However, there has not been widespread acceptance in classrooms.

Scarbrough et al. (2004) found that there were some real world applications of PBL in the business world. Their study determined that there were two learning processes in PBL: learning by absorption and learning by reflection. Absorption refers to when prior knowledge is recognized and valued, upon which new information is added; this is much like building a scaffold. Reflection refers to examining what worked well in a learning experience and what did not work well. After this process, changes are made based on the information gained during the reflection.

According to Berns and Erickson (2001), contextual teaching and learning fosters learning experiences for students that have real world applications. This pedagogic approach considers the integration of disciplines, as well as the cultural context of the students, as very important tenants to creating a successful classroom experience. An example of such experience comes from Banks (2010), who used a PBL approach to teach about nutrition at an African American middle school. She reported that students were more engaged because they had the opportunity to conduct interviews and use electronic media to present their projects to the class. Banks also noted that students went further in the construction of projects because there was an atmosphere of ownership of the information where students were gathering and presenting information in an authentic manner. Young (2005) found that intrinsic motivation increased in students as a result of self-regulated learning strategies and classroom environment. According to Freshwater (2009), students doing PBL increased their writing and research skills, but they did not perform better on state content tests than their counterparts. Some of the factors were attributed to a lack of resources at the school where teachers implemented PBL.

When first graders were presented with an opportunity to have negotiated planning time for a project, their natural curiosity for solving problems was better served (Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009). The teacher and students in this study prepared for the required standardized test without losing sight of a project-based approach to learning. A unique feature of the negotiated planning strategies was that the teacher could incorporate material required for the tests into the projects. Students were encouraged to work together to solve the problems they encountered. When mistakes were made, everyone could benefit by working together to correct them.

Over the past two decades, school districts have offered several programs such as magnet schools and arts-based schools to attract students and appeal to their interests (Vopat, 2011). Two such schools in Minnesota are the Fair School in Downtown Minneapolis and the Perpich Center for Performing Arts in Golden Valley. In addition, Minneapolis public schools created several magnet schools to appeal to the interests of parents and students. Magnets ranged from science, math, and technology to visual and performing arts programs. The argument in Vopat's study is that these schools are not a good resource because they do not address the inequity in opportunities for a diverse student population.

Asanti (1987) argued for culturally relevant teaching for black students through Afrocentric education. From an Afrocentric perspective, he noted that it is important to engage black students with content that helps them identify racially with the subjects they learn. Asanti attributed the positive attitude that black students experienced in a safe classroom space with the time when the curriculum was driven by culturally appropriate content for black students. Although Afrocentric education is an engagement strategy, PBL is not a specific part of its philosophy. Similar to Afrocentric classrooms, black males have responded favorably to collaborative learning environments (Lee, 2010).

Studies have investigated the role African American teachers serve in the education of black males (Brown, 2009). The role teachers play is important, regardless of their race. However, the perception that African American males have a more positive impact on black male students was due in part to common experiences both shared in the real world. Hip hop music has served as a vehicle to advance this belief. An example of this shared experience is represented in the following lyrics to the rap song, "Brothers Gonna Work it Out" by Chuck D. - Public Enemy:

*So many of us in limbo*

*How to get it on, it's quite simple*

*3 stones from the sun*

*We need a piece of this rock*

*Our goal indestructible soul*

*Answers to this quizzin'*

*To the Brothers in the street schools and the prisons*

*History shouldn't be a mystery*

*Our stories real history*

*Not his story*

*We gonna work it one day*

*Till we all get paid*

*The right way in full, no bull*

*Talkin', no walkin', drivin', arrivin' in style*

*Soon you'll see what I'm talkin' 'bout*

*'Cause one day*

*The brothers gonna work it out*

*Brothers, brothers gonna work it out* (Ridenhour, Sadler, & Shocklee, 1990)

Collins' 2011 collaboration with scholar Cornel West further illustrates this accountability black men should have for one another in the song "Freedumb" (Collins & West, 2011). The chorus of the song states, "If you wanna be free, then you can't be dumb."

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) is a charter school created by educator Jeffrey Canada in Harlem, New York. The program is designed to help black children close the

achievement gap; it emphasizes reading in preschool and heavily involves parents and community partners. Some of the core principles of teaching and learning at HCZ include: reading to preschool children every day, learning through play, and establishing a home-to-school partner for every family with students at the school (Dobbie, Fryer, & National Bureau of Economic Review, 2009). Parents are often learning beside their students in this program. The results from HCZ on state tests indicate moderate improvements in math in grades six through eight. Bracey (2009) points out that eighth grade scores were the only grade level comparable to white students in the state. He argued there were no significant gains in any other test areas.

In the current literature on PBL, there is very little that addresses it as a specific pedagogic approach to contextualize learning for black males in high school. Banks (2010), Gay (2000), Emdin (2010), Wright (2011), and Moses (2001) all focused on middle school implementation of PBL. Velez (2010) suggested that PBL has produced higher achievement for minority students, particularly English learners, relative to their achievement in comprehensive high schools. McDougal (2009) noted that black male high school students could potentially respond well to project-based learning. It is my intention to add to the current literature by exploring what ways PBL as contextual pedagogy engage black males in high school at a first ring suburban school in the Twin Cities metro area of Minnesota. Given the plight of black males in public education, this study will be relevant to advance the discourse on closing the achievement gap. As the next chapter shows, Instrumental Case Study with Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework will serve as an appropriate methodology.



### Chapter Three – Method

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the contextual pedagogical influences of project-based learning on school engagement, creativity, and problem solving for black male students at a suburban Minnesota high school. The research questions are as follows:

1. How can contextual pedagogy help lessen the achievement gap of black male high school students?
2. As a form of contextual pedagogy, in what ways does project-based learning engage black high school students?
3. In what ways can project-based learning offer insight about the soaring suspension rates of black male high school students?

#### Instrumental Case Study

The methodology for my qualitative research study was an instrumental case study. My choice of this methodology was rooted in my curiosity about how real life experiences can impact the learner. Namely, pedagogic practices that engage black males in high school. This study focused on a small sample size of students to better facilitate building a relationship between the students and the teacher.

Defining characteristics. Based on critical inquiry as explained by Merriam (2009), epistemology should be grounded in social justice and equality. My theoretical framework is contextual pedagogy, which draws from Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As a conceptual model, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was at the heart of my application of contextual pedagogy. This theory is based on Bell's (1980) "interest convergence," a principle of the theory that can be used as a tool to explain, analyze, and study policies and practices in teacher education as they converge around race (Milner, 2008). Bell's original

application of the concept interest convergence was as a legal scholar. In assessing how the country was fairing with desegregation efforts brought about by *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), he argued that it was a failure in many cities. The reason he suggested this was because whites had no incentive to change as long as their interests did not intersect with the interests of blacks.

Contextual pedagogy considers the unique life situation of each student and allows him/her to be at the center of his/her own learning. The comprehensive nature of this teaching approach involves facilitating historical perspective, contemporary social context, and cultural awareness. Combined with CRT, contextual pedagogy factors in how each teaching strategy employed in the classroom converges around race, color, and students' responses to teaching practices.

Cases studies are often used in a wide variety of ways and are prevalent in the field of education (Merriam, 1998). According to Stake (1995), a case is a "specific, and complex, functioning thing" (p. 2). He suggests focusing on specific people, groups, or programs rather than generalities such as relationships amongst schools. With this view, case studies are bounded systems. Merriam (1998) suggests that a phenomenon should be intrinsically bounded in order to qualify as a case study. Intrinsic case studies are often used as a strategy of empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real life context (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996; Yin, 1994). For example, specific teachers, students, or groups can be studied only to gain insight to the specific case. Instrumental case studies are designed to gain insight or a general understanding of a question (Stake, 1995). In this instance, the study can be used to understand something beyond the specific case.

Rationale. According to Stake (1995), the reason to select an instrumental case study design is to better understand a phenomenon beyond the specific case. My design follows that prescription. I am interested in understanding PBL as a contextual pedagogic practice with black males as an engagement strategy. This method will allow for greater discourse in K-12 education at-large that pertains to problems with black males' lack of school engagement. Further, this design focused on teaching and learning practices in order to explore any implications that could add to current research in the field. I have chosen a study design, which as a practitioner, may interest other practitioners who could benefit from the findings of this research.

Participants and procedures. The participants in this study were 14 black males, grades ten through twelve. Students were selected from a roster of students with assistance from the school counselors. Students were invited to participate as a result of my consulting with the school's equity coordinator. In a purposive selection process, the factors for selecting participants include: 1) all participants were black males; 2) all participants were in grades ten through twelve; 3) and all participants were available to participate in the study. A letter of invitation was sent via U.S. Mail to the participant's parents to gain consent. They were asked to mail signed consent forms in a stamped envelope to Minnesota State University, Mankato. I then conducted follow-up phone calls to parents to confirm participation status. Separate letters of assent were given to participants once consent was gained.

The context of the case was as follows. The school setting was a suburban high school outside of Minneapolis in Minnesota. The student demographics in the school were 70% white and 30% non-white with around 22% of those students who were black. The PBL sessions, which the facilitator called the PBL Lab, was held after school during a two-month period, two

times per week for two hours, for a total of 16 sessions. The equity coordinator facilitated the sessions. As part of the case study design, I observed how students responded to project-based learning as an engagement strategy.

The classroom space was a room for general usage in a first ring suburban high school. The room was big enough to accommodate chairs and writing spaces (desks, chairs, and tables) for over 20 students. There was a white board, audio enhancement system, and projector with SMART board technology in the room. Students also had enough room to break out into individual and small group work space.

Data collection procedures. Two rounds of tape-recorded interviews were conducted with each student involved in the study. The first interview occurred before the class sessions began to better assess their current levels of engagement in school; the second interview occurred at the end of the PBL course. In addition to the interview data, I collected attendance data including days absent and tardy for the term prior to the study and the term during the study. I recorded that information on a form (Appendix D).

My observations of student progress with projects and their responses to PBL were kept in a notebook. Each session was also tape-recorded. I made a comparison of student attendance records from the term of the study and the previous term. Data was also collected in the form of student work and weekly “critical incident questionnaires” as prescribed by Brookfield (2006).

According to Brookfield (2006), the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) is a way to see one’s teaching practice through the eyes of the students. It is a one-page form given to students once a week at the end of the last class. Students are requested to write about specific activities or actions that were engaging, confusing, helpful, etc. It is a way to keep a running commentary on how the students feel about their learning.

It was my goal to gain trustworthiness by triangulating data from interviews, observations, and student school records. Data collection commenced in the spring semester of 2013. Data analysis occurred during the summer semester of 2013 with findings reported at the end of the semester.

Instrumentation. I used a combination of pre- and post-class interviews, observations, student records, and student projects. The semi-structured questions included in the pre-class interviews are in Appendix A. Student project proposals are in Appendix B. Post-class interview questions are in Appendix C. Attendance data is in Appendix D.

Project-based lessons (PBL) served as the strategy to help engage each student on his path toward academic achievement. For this study, students were asked to design projects of their choosing alone or in groups in order to meet their stated goals in the pre-study interviews. They choose to work in teams or as individuals, depending on their interests and learning styles. Next, they presented a proposal for projects which included the following information:

- title of the project;
- steps for completion;
- resources needed;
- timeline for completion; and
- a written summary.

For each week during the study, the teacher facilitated a weekly “check-in” to assess how each student felt about his progress with the projects. Check-ins also served as an opportunity to see how they felt about school and life in general (an important part of contextual pedagogy).

There are several ways to facilitate checking in with students. Brookfield (2006) provided examples, including “the one-minute paper” (p. 37), “the muddiest point” (p. 38), “the learning

audit” (pp. 38-39), and “student learning journals” (p. 39). The teacher will use a combination of these strategies. One instrument that this study consistently employed is known as the “critical incident questionnaire.” For this study, the following five questions will be used (Brookfield, 2006, p. 42-43), with the exception that I chose to place the word “school” where the word “class” is used:

1. At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in class this week were you most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This can be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did or anything else that occurs).

Students did not put their names on the CIQ. However, the teacher facilitated discussions from what students wrote as well as weekly topical discussions. My role as a researcher was to observe and tape-record all classes, as well as take notes in a journal of my observations. During their last session students presented their projects.

It is important to note that to increase trustworthiness and to reduce some of my biases as a black male, I acknowledge that I have been impacted personally and professionally by the issues discussed in this dissertation. I have chosen to minimize this bias by determining my role to be that of observer rather than facilitator for the class. In addition, the data that I report from students provide less potential for my biases due to the nature of the PBL process.

Contextual pedagogy is an approach to teaching that allows the context of the learner (in this case, black males) to be at the center of teaching strategy. A comprehensive approach was used

as foundational support to student learning. Teaching from this perspective includes a theoretical, historical, and cultural knowledge. I prepared the facilitator of the class with all of this information in the form of several meetings prior to beginning the study. The next paragraph provides an example of how this foundational support connects with a sample project.

I used a comprehensive foundational support in order to prepare to use PBL. For example, if students wanted to do a project involving a major scale in music, it could be described as follows:

- theoretical information includes how a particular subject functions mechanically; for example, a major scale in music= 2 whole steps + one half step + 3 whole steps + one half step in sequence;
- historical information includes how and why the theory was derived;
- cultural information includes how the subject is valued by larger society.

In student presentation of projects, all three criteria described above would be a part of the presentation.

Furthermore, in my pedagogic design, context refers to where and how the student intersects with all three parts of this comprehensive framework, as well as how the teacher uses such knowledge to positively engage the student. In this case, context included how black males intersected with the framework.

Data analysis. Interviews were coded according to Creswell's (2013) suggestions for coding interviews in qualitative research. I used open coding to begin to find categories or themes, axial coding for major themes or categories, concluding with the interpretation of data. For my observations, I used similar coding. I also followed guidelines for levels of analysis prescribed by Merriam (1998). The findings are reported in narrative form to be consistent with that aspect

of my study and writing.

Participants were told that their participation in this research study was voluntary and they could stop at any time without penalty by letting the facilitator know. They were told that they will not receive anything for participating. No real names of any students were used in the findings of this study. I am reporting the general overarching themes that I found. Pseudonyms were created to keep confidentiality. I created such pseudonyms based on a system of creating code names based on the last letter of each participant's first name. All records, including forms, notes, and tape recordings are maintained and stored in a locked file at the office of my faculty advisor on the campus of Minnesota State Mankato. Records will all be destroyed after 3 years.



## **Chapter Four – Findings**

In this chapter, I will explain the results of the study by organizing and reporting on the qualitative data as follows: 1) introduction; 2) Project-based learning (PBL) process; 3) pre-study interviews, attendance, and participant background data; 4) PBL session observations; 5) student projects; and, 6) post-PBL interviews and attendance data.

There were 14 students who agreed to participate in the case study. All of the names used in this study are pseudonyms. Weekly attendance varied. Several students were limited in their participation due to either having jobs after school, or extracurricular activities they needed to attend. The facilitator, Larry, allowed these students to attend whenever possible. There was a consistent group of seven students that came almost every week. Two students did not miss any sessions.

### **PBL Process**

The general format for each week began with discussion time followed by a combination of written assignments, Critical Incident Questionnaires (CIQ), and project work time. Students were told that projects were to be developed and presented to the group at the end of the eight-week session. They were encouraged to think about a project that was meaningful to them either on an individual basis or in groups. Larry gave them steps through an outline to help understand what was necessary to be successful. The outline was a proposal for projects. It included a timeline, title proposal, resources or materials that would be needed, and a written summary explaining the project. To keep projects moving forward, Larry required them to give updates on their progress every week. There was not a set time given to projects; students were allowed to work on projects based on their own timelines for completion.

The CIQs were used to check-in with students relative to how they felt about school, themselves, and others. This five question CIQ written reflection (see Appendix F) was done once per week. Students did not have to put their names on the CIQ. This was done to promote student freedom to express without fear of attaching their names to a potential criticism of each other, the school or any of its staff members.

Topics for discussion included issues that were either initiated by the facilitator or students. During the PBL sessions, the topics of race, culture, class, gender, racism, and black male identity were all discussed on an ongoing basis. Written assignments from Larry were usually responses to prompts he wanted the group to address. There was also time allotted for verbal responses to some of Larry's questions.

In addition to providing time to discuss and respond to questions, students were given time to brainstorm about project ideas. Discussion questions and prompts were also aimed at developing critical thinking skills. Project ideas usually followed discussion time.

As students began to develop project ideas, Larry indicated that he had high expectations for the work that would be completed during the PBL sessions. Students were given direct feedback on written work and verbal responses to questions. These assignments were often used as a way to promote creative thinking and not directly related to projects. During the course of the PBL sessions, students often turned in re-writes of assignments they were given. Larry used a variety of resources as examples of material related to project ideas and discussion topics. Resources included audio books, printed articles, and video (DVD). There were no grades or scoring system attached to any assignments.

## **Pre-study Interviews**

Four interview questions were asked of 14 participants. By comparing each participant's responses, axial coding was used to identify categorical themes for the group. Question one was, "On a scale from 1-5, rate your interest in school?" The answers ranged from 2-4. There were five students who rated their interest at 4, three students at 3, and six students rated their interest at 2. There were no students who rated their interest level at 5 or 1. It appeared that a slight majority of this group had a moderately high interest in school, while almost half of them had a moderately low interest.

Question two was, "List your favorite subjects in school and why?" Using axial coding, two categorical themes emerged. The first theme was that students' favorite classes actively engaged them on either a mental or physical level. The second theme was that students selected subjects that they already had a high aptitude for. Henry, for example, talked about his interest in classes that were philosophical because he felt he had the opportunity to think more deeply. He also liked how certain classes and teachers related learning to real world processes like how math applies building and construction. Henry mentioned his success in Geometry class. He then described how important it was for him to have a teacher who could make learning relevant, suggesting that this was key to his success. According to Henry, the relevance of his classes was based on the teacher's level of personal interest in what she/he was teaching and why the instructor had a high level of interest. Yohan, a tenth grade student who was highly athletic and participated in track and football, loved gym class because it displayed his athleticism as a kinesthetic learner. Nene particularly liked his community involvement class because he enjoyed talking and is very outgoing. Eddie talked about his history class because he could learn

about his own heritage as an African American. Nate enjoyed singing and his love for the arts; in particular, choir class.

The third interview question was, “What is your career goal?” The major theme that surfaced from this question was professional preparation and/or a high level of training. Some of the students referenced career goals that required college degrees of four or more years. Such career goals included becoming an early childhood educator, business owner, or surgeon. Other participants suggested jobs that required advanced training, or a high level of skill such as a professional rap artist, air-land mechanic, community organizer, professional skateboarder, culinary chef, and an entrepreneur. Two of the students did not know what their career goals were yet.

Another theme that emerged from the third interview question was that most students stated they wanted to be at the top of their chosen profession. This passion to succeed was illustrated by how many of them wanted to own their own business, patent a product as an entrepreneur, or become an artist so they could express who they are.

The fourth interview question was, “What are your goals for the eight weeks of PBL sessions?” Three themes emerged from this question. First, students wanted to learn new things and gain new knowledge. The indicator for this theme in part was how many times during the interviews participants used the words “learn” and “new knowledge.” There were also expressions of open-mindedness in some responses.

The second theme to emerge from the fourth interview question could be categorized as guidance. Several students referenced that they wanted to be provided with guidance to help them accomplish future goals in their chosen profession. College entrance was one example that came up with most participants.

The third theme that emerged from the fourth question is categorized as completing a finished product or accomplishing a goal. Heath wanted to learn how to produce music; Edward wanted to patent an accessory for skateboards. Within this theme, there was also a desire to work together. Many of the participants shared that they wanted to hear ideas from other group members and share their ideas with one another. For example, Eddie stated it as follows: “I feel like I have a lot of ideas and a lot of new innovative techniques to doing things that I could help with. I feel like together, with all the minds in there, we could all come up with something amazingly creative.”

#### **Attendance Data.**

Previous to the study, black males that participated in it had a wide range of absences between them, specifically during the prior term (term two). This data was gleaned from term two, before the study began. The school has a block schedule with four, 90-minute blocks per school day. The institution calculates absences by the number of blocks missed. The highest number of absences for a student in this study was 33 blocks. The lowest was one absence. The highest number of tardiness was 27 and the lowest was one. The total number of absences was 177 and the total numbers of tardiness was 94.

In order to provide some perspective on the group’s attendance record in this study, the data resulted in the following: five students had four or less absences, three students had between five to 10 absences; six students had 11 to 20 absences; and two students had 21 or more absences. One aspect the attendance data revealed was that students with the highest number of absences had the lowest GPA, while students with the lowest number of absences had a higher GPA. The total number of absences during the study was 299, while the number of tardiness

was 116. This data shows a significant increase in total absences during the term when the PBL sessions were taking place.

### **Project-based Learning (PBL) Session Observations**

The following observations were derived from my written notes and audio recordings of each PBL session. There were two sessions per week for eight weeks, for a total of 16 sessions. The sessions were held after the school day. The first part of this section will be devoted to describing how the process was introduced to the students by the facilitator, Larry. As mentioned above, all names referenced in this chapter are pseudonyms.

I will describe the first two sessions in more detail to provide a better idea of how the process was introduced to students. In addition, I will describe the students' behavior and reaction to the facilitation. Following the description of the beginning processes, there will be some thematic observations for PBL engagement.

Facilitator. Larry was the equity integration specialist at the school. In that role, he had prior interactions with most of the students who participated in the study. Observations of the interaction between the students and facilitator were as follows. Larry introduced the PBL sessions to the students and then asked them why they chose to participate in the PBL sessions. He asked each student to explain his answer verbally to that question. His facilitation of the group involved using conversational, discussion-based strategies. In addition, Larry elicited critical thinking from students by prompting them with open-ended questions, reacting to articles and videos, and using current events as a catalyst to spark discussion. He set goals for what he wanted to accomplish with each session, and set deadlines for when he wanted assignments to be completed. He also allowed them to establish and agree to goals that they deemed important.

Larry allowed for student feedback and he gave them some latitude with how they would accomplish goals that they helped to set. The next section of this chapter reports some specific observations of Larry's interaction with students in this study, as well as their reactions and behaviors.

In the first session, there were two students in attendance. Larry began by explaining some ground rules for how the sessions would unfold. He began each meeting with a prompt to get the students thinking about their interests. The prompts also served as a way to get them to discuss a wide range of topics that included how they perceived themselves and how others perceived them. The prompt in the first meeting was about self-image. A third student came in late. Larry met with him to provide the same background and introduction to the class. Students began a discussion about imagery and leadership, particularly black male leadership. They talked about role models and icons, and the differences between positive and negative images of black males. Towards the end of the first session, Larry guided the discussion to help students recognize how to view them in a more positive light. Then he asked them to think about potential projects they might be interested in exploring, with the caveat that they consider projects that would be meaningful to them.

Session two began with what Larry termed a group "check-in." There were eight students in attendance. He reviewed rules of engagement for the group. Two of the "rules" were that whatever was stated was to be used for the benefit of the group and that they were encouraged to speak freely and honestly.

The prompt for session two was to have students reflect on and then share characteristics about themselves. The students were asked what they thought about most in life. To get students to respond, Larry administered a series of questions and required a written response. He

told them that he wanted their first response to be as authentic as possible. The questions were as follows:

- 1) What is your most noticeable characteristic?
- 2) What is a quality you most admire in yourself?
- 3) What's the quality you most admire in a woman?
- 4) What is a quality you most admire in a man?
- 5) What do you most value in your friends?
- 6) What is your biggest flaw?
- 7) What is your favorite occupation?
- 8) What is happiness for you?
- 9) What would be your biggest loss?
- 10) What would you like to be?
- 11) Who are your heroes?
- 12) What historical figures do you most despise?
- 13) What natural gift would like to possess?
- 14) What is your state of mind?
- 15) What is your motto?
- 16) How would you like to die?

During this question and writing period, several students asked for more clarification so Larry answered their questions. The students deliberated on this activity for a long time before they finished. Responses were turned in. Then, he reminded students that the purpose of the exercise was to get them to think about themselves from a perspective of time: past, present, and future. All students engaged in the first exercise and appeared to complete it. A discussion



ensued as students shared their answers with each other. Students were given time to reflect on how each question resonated with them at this stage of life.

Near the end of session two, Larry asked students to share what was most useful to them during that day's class. Vincent shared that a statement Larry made struck him during discussion time. Vincent recounted that it was important for students to create a culture of success. Yohan mentioned that he was reflecting upon reevaluating his image based on what he thought about himself, as opposed to what others expected of him. Nene was particularly interested in a term Larry used during the discussion - "meta-cognition." The session ended with Larry's encouragement that students remain true to who they were and not what they thought other people wanted them to be.

The CIQ's were completed once per week. Some students preferred to use them and some did not. The main themes that arose from the CIQ's are described in detail below, including an example of a student narrative.

1) Responses were more detailed if students experienced something that upset them during the week. If they felt good about the way things were going, or did not have a major stress-causing incident, their responses were short. As a result, answers were either one-word responses or short sentences to explain what happened.

2) Students responded to the questions in ways that revealed issues relative to their relationships that school day. Such relationships reflected both student-to-teacher and student-to-student dynamics.

On one CIQ, some students voiced their frustration over an incident in which two of them ended up with a five-day suspension. They shared how they went to the assistant principal (an African American male) with a concern they had about a group of white students who had

exhibited racially insensitive behavior. They explained how they saw the ski club (all white members) dressed up and put together a “Ghetto Spirit Day.” The ski club members dressed in fur coats, dew rags, gold chains, and spoke in black dialect to imitate rap artists. After they voiced their concern, they explained that the assistant principal started to question them.

According to the students, *they* were questioned and *their* records were examined, rather than the records of the students that displayed the racially inappropriate behavior. The assistant principal told them that he would check into it, yet he warned the two students that *they* had better do well and behave in class. Subsequently, the students left angry because they were not heard.

Students explained that they went back the next day and would not except the administrator’s actions, arguing that they did not understand how the focus was now on them instead of the students who they felt exhibited racially insensitive behavior.

The two students decided to do something to express their dissatisfaction with what had transpired. They made several posters and put them up across from the main office in what they described as a non-violent protest aimed at social justice. One of the posters read, “Privilege is not Authority?” and the second poster, “What Is Equal?” As a result of this action, they were called back into the principal’s office because they put the posters up without the school’s permission. According to the two students, they explained why they posted them in the school commons area; it was to get people thinking about social justice. Next, they asked for the posters back, promising that they would not put them up and explained that they were going to use them as part of their project. The principal, who had the posters in a bin in his office, told them that they could not get them back. One of the students became frustrated and reached out to take the posters. At that point, the school police liaison officer was called. He placed one of the students in handcuffs and issued citations to both students for disorderly conduct. They were

told that they had to appear in court or pay a \$50 fine. In addition, both students were suspended for five days.

The particular CIQ containing the narrative explained above was discussed verbally by the students because they wanted to see what Larry thought about the incident. Larry initiated a conversation with the students about how to stay positive as they moved forward. He also agreed to advocate for the students in their follow-up readmission meeting with administration, which was, according to policy, required in order to return to school.

In the following weeks, many of the weekly CIQ's had positive responses to the PBL process and showed that students were learning by attending these sessions. Students expressed how Larry was showing them how to deal with the challenges they faced in life and school. Furthermore, they mentioned how he was doing it in a positive, productive manner. They referred to how much they were learning from Larry on a number of occasions.

Student projects. Project ideas came from a combination of discussion, career interest, and prompts from Larry. During session three, Larry asked for the first verbal description of project ideas. Some students wanted to work with other students in the group. Henry and Vincent knew they were going to work together. Yohan, Nate, Edward, and Heath were thinking of individual projects. Larry asked the students to come to the next session with a written outline of their project proposals. The outline information as described in Chapter 3 included title, steps for completion, resources needed, timeline, and a written description and/or summary.

The next PBL session began with each student sharing his project idea. The ideas varied, but most of them involved the development of products and services for the general public. For example, Edward wanted to develop an accessory for skateboards. He described it as grip tape; a product that would help skateboarders stay on their boards. Nate and Heath wanted to produce a

rap music CD; Heath wanted to write song lyrics that could be recorded as spoken word or rap, and Nate was thinking about producing a CD with his vocals as a singer. Yohan wanted to invent virtual reality technology that integrated brain waves into head wear such as baseball caps, helmets, and the like. He spent some time researching brain function and how brainwaves worked. Vincent was tossing around two ideas. He thought about creating a documentary of their experience in PBL. He asked about videotaping the PBL sessions as part of his interest in capturing the work that the students would do during PBL time. Vincent and Henry also wanted to develop a project based on entrepreneurship. In their initial explanation, they talked about using a business to promote cultural awareness.

Over the next several sessions, more time was devoted to project development. Discussion time focused on the intersection of student project ideas with work that Larry wanted to do relative to black male perception and identity. He incorporated group think time that directly related to how the projects would be perceived by the larger population.

In session seven, Larry assigned students to read an article on Willie Lynch. The article explained how slave owner Willie Lynch helped plantation owners in Virginia control their slaves during the early 1700s. Lynch created a hierarchical structure on plantations that pitted field slaves against house slaves. He also developed terror techniques such as whipping and lynching (derived from Lynch's last name) slaves from trees. Several students voiced how the article was relevant to some of their experiences in school, especially in light of what had happened to the two students who had been suspended.

By session eight, most of the group that attended every week consolidated their efforts into what they termed a "collective." Yohan had not missed a session, but could not complete his part because he started track practice. Edward was absent for the past three sessions. The

group indicated that they were trying to hold each other accountable for attending each PBL session. However, they did not know if Edward would return. They made the decision that they could combine their individual talents to start this collective based on creativity and entrepreneurship.

The decision to morph all of their efforts into one project was arrived at with some facilitation by Larry. Henry assumed a leadership role as students conversed about how they would individually pursue their ideas. He had developed the main idea for how the collective could work. Vincent originally wanted to produce a documentary on the experiences of black males in a high school such as the one they attended. He now wanted to partner with Henry and utilize his interest in communications to help Henry.

Some students, particularly Heath and Nate, were not sure how to finish their individual projects. Larry suggested that there might be a way for them to support each other by talking about joining together if it seemed appropriate to do so. Henry indicated that he had made arrangements outside of session time to work with Vincent, Nene, and Eddie. Larry asked Nate and Heath if they could propose a plan for how to contribute to Henry's concept. Nate proposed that he would develop the promotions and eventually record music to support the concept on the collective. Heath began to write his ideas. He eventually shared that he wanted to add a perspective for awareness of issues, such as hate. He stated, "I want to expose the hate not seen by the naked eye."

The group discussed how to utilize various strengths and interests of those who were now coming on a regular basis to start a business. Henry wanted to design logos, drawings, and possible prints for clothing and other products. Eddie felt his role would be tying everything together and coordinating all of the necessary details to be successful. Vincent wanted to

organize how the group would communicate its vision through various media. He also helped write the mission statement. Heath and Nate wanted to help distribute and promote the idea and significance of their collective. In addition, Nate wanted to find a way to incorporate original music as a way to promote the business. Nene offered his talent to build the website. As part of the group process, each student would take on a specific role. Henry was very clearly the leader and visionary of the group; it was his idea to create the project. They named it Teflon Beehive. Each week, other students took on various roles to move the project forward.

The basis of the collective project is described in the written proposal submitted to Larry, by Henry. It stated, “Teflon Beehive is a collective of young energy. We are a movement based on cultural awareness, revolutionizing our generation’s paradigm through influential creativity. We are a brand that stands for the same qualities as a beehive—all of us working towards one goal, and that’s uniting all cultures, using propaganda, education, and entrepreneurship/sustainability.”

Henry further explained how the term “Teflon” was chosen to represent resiliency. The term “beehive” was chosen to reflect student’s conviction that they could work on different tasks and still be part of a collective that was united by one goal. The group’s goal was to market everyone’s ideas.

To help get started, the group developed a business plan and assigned various tasks to group members. Their initial product was a Teflon Beehive fashion clothing line. First, they designed shirts and then printed them. Larry helped to connect them with professionals who listened to their plan and agreed to help. He also facilitated the project by helping students fill out paperwork, which the state required to start a business. This project became the students’ final presentation at the end of the eight-week PBL lab.

In session 10, students worked on outlines and prepared for their final presentation. Henry missed school that day, but came to the PBL session. He assumed a leadership role within the group. Part of the time was used for individual work time. Time was also allowed for the group to come together to assess if they were reaching their goals. Larry helped them clarify how to move forward so that each of the students was aware of his role and responsibility in the group. He also stressed the importance of that responsibility.

By the time session 13 arrived, Yohan could no longer participate due to track practice. Henry and Vincent then asked Larry if they could bring a peer they knew who had a skill set that could support their project. He was another student and knew how to promote ideas and products. Larry agreed to let their friend help.

Students also shared that they had set up consultations with other teachers in school that could help them with their project. Part of the discussion during this session revealed that students were working on this project during class time. Some teachers became concerned that the students were missing content from their classes in order to work on this project. Larry finished the session reminding students that they had to get the final project done within the next two sessions in order to present on the last day of class.

During sessions 14 and 15, the group focused on defining their brand. Larry brought materials to review that he thought were good examples of web-based, community business models. He also set up a phone conference with a representative from the fashion/media industry. The representative lived in Atlanta and was known for promoting fashion designs for hip-hop artist and web-based clothing lines. Vincent talked on the phone with the representative and explained their project. After the phone conversation, the representative indicated an interest to continue a dialogue with the group about their business. Two of them, who had family in

Atlanta, happened to be traveling there for spring break. Arrangements were made for these students to meet the representative in Atlanta to show her samples of their shirt designs.

Next, the group discussed future implications for their new company. They had a discussion about how to proceed after the PBL sessions ended. They all agreed they wanted to pursue the project after class session ended. Part of the conversation was about establishing a seasonal line of fashions such as fall, spring, and summer. They also discussed a fashion line specifically aimed at a female market, including what colors to consider for women's fashion. Larry had them finish session 15 by finalizing the details of their final project presentation. He had students work in pairs to check for accountability in each other's projects. Students went over their individual assignments and checked each other's work.

The final presentation was in the form of a PowerPoint. Students presented it as if they were presenting their company to potential business partners. They had business cards printed with their logo design on it, along with sample t-shirts (See Appendix E). In addition, the group created a future website template for Teflon Beehive. In the presentation, students presented their concept as a means to express how young black males are perceived today. The mission statement was stated, "'Teflon' is a sign of resilience and 'Beehive' stands for unity. We are uniting all cultures through education and entrepreneurship as well as eliminating financial barriers." The presentation included how the company wanted to develop a scholarship fund for future generations of students. Students would use money raised through the selling of their merchandise as well as soliciting donations by organizing events to promote their mission. Future plans included starting a fashion line for women and marketing different designs specifically for this demographic.



Each student played a role in organizing the presentation. They defined the collective, identified the mission of the company, and described each person's role. The organization of the collective included two designers, a marketing advisor, organizer, networking specialist, head of promotions, and a promotion committee. One of their first goals was to establish a scholarship fund for students who needed help with ACT prep classes and AP exams. The long-term goal for Teflon Beehive was stated as follows: "We want this movement to become an empire supporting cultural equality and sustainability nationwide!" The presentation took approximately 10 minutes to deliver.

The last session ended with Larry providing feedback and recommendations for how to improve the presentation, whether or not students carried the project forward. One of the recommendations was that students practice the presentation to determine exactly who would deliver each line. Larry asked the group to think about setting a goal for how much money they wanted to make and how it would be allocated. This conversation led to another topic about wealth. He asked students how much money each of them considered it would take to become wealthy and what would happen to them if they reached that goal. Some students thought it would take \$50,000 to become wealthy and some went as high as \$10 million as a goal to reach. Finally, Larry asked students to reflect on the PBL process by asking them how to respond to what they thought about the project and what they learned in the process. Much of what they shared was similar to the responses to the post-study interviews, which follows in the next portion of this chapter.

### **Post-study Interviews**

There were four post-study interview questions: 1) What was your experience with Project-Based Learning (PBL) like? 2) Did you meet your goals for the class? Why or why not?

3) How does PBL fit with your career goals? 4) How would your view of school be if it was a PBL model?

Regarding question one, there were two themes. Theme one was the development of self-awareness and confidence. Indicators for this theme were based on responses about believing more in themselves and gaining the necessary tools to be successful. Theme two was building teamwork. Nate suggested that it was important to believe in yourself alongside others who also believe in you. Several student responses pinpointed how the process helped them to become self-aware and learn how to see themselves from a different perspective.

Divided into two parts, question two was as follows: "Did you meet your goals for the class? Why or why not?" The dominant theme was that students felt they set new expectations or exceeded the expectations they set. Some were unsure of why they came; however, as the process became clearer to them, they revised their initial expectations. Students also thought they achieved more by participating in the project than they thought. This realization was how students rationalized either realizing or exceeding their original goals for the sessions.

Question three was "How does project-based learning fit with your career goals?" Two themes emerged. First were the benefits of group collaboration. Responses to this question indicated that participants felt positively about the group dynamics and their teamwork. The second theme was that students felt the process provided a foundational outline for them to prepare for success. This was evident by the number of responses that contained the phrases "self-reliance," or "doing things ourselves." In addition, there were a number of references on how the project helped them build their skills or add to their knowledge base. A second part of this theme was a connection students felt by taking responsibility for their learning and

encountering the classroom in a different manner than they had before. The indication was their interest level would rise.

Question four was “How would your view of school be if it were a PBL model?” Salient themes included: (1) the value of relationships between students and teachers; (2) the development of relevant, real world job skills, and (3) the opportunity to rebuild a more positive view of school. Responses to this question indicated a general excitement for PBL as an alternative model for learning. Students referenced the quality of their learning increased due to the impact of the PBL process.

### **Post-study Attendance Data**

The attendance data here was taken at the end of the third term. The PBL sessions began at the beginning of the third term (January-March) and only specific to this particular term. The data revealed that the highest number of blocks missed was 87 by one student. The lowest number of blocks missed was four. Of the 14 students who participated in the study, one student had four or less absences, six students had between five to 10 absences, three students incurred 11 to 20 absences, and five students had 21 or more absences.

There were several students with larger differences in absences between the terms before and during PBL. There were no students who had the same number of absences for both terms. Twelve students had more absences in the term during PBL. Of those students, one had 54 more absences in the term during PBL, one student had 21 more absences, and one student had 13 more absences. Two students had fewer absences in the term during PBL. One factor in the attendance data was the suspension of two of the students during the term PBL sessions were in progress. As they referenced in a CIQ earlier, it was for five days, which accounted for 40 absences.

The highest number for single student tardiness was 30. One student had zero and was never tardy. In comparing the data to the term before PBL sessions, the number of times students were tardy to class were fairly consistent. There were no significant differences for any particular student in terms of the number of times late to class. Three students had the same number of times they were tardy. Eight students were tardy several times during the term PBL sessions occurred. Three students were tardy less during the term PBL sessions occurred. The GPA for the term during PBL was lower than the pre-study data. In most cases, students with a lower GPA had higher numbers of absences, similar to the data before PBL.

To conclude, the findings in this chapter were a descriptive narrative of observations and other data collection tools that helped complete the case study. The following chapter will be prescriptive. It will serve to interpret the findings, address the research questions, discuss implications of the study, and make recommendations for future research and/or considerations pertaining to PBL and black males in high school.

## **Chapter Five – Conclusions and Implications for Further Research**

The outline for this chapter is divided into four sections. Section one will draw conclusions and interpret qualitative data, present pre- and post-study interviews, describe the role of the facilitator, and discuss the significance of Project-based learning (PBL) sessions. Section two will address each of the three research questions and make connections to findings in Chapter Four. Section three will focus on implications of the study, and the fourth and final section will address future research.

### **Pre-study Interviews**

The pre-study interviews and attendance data revealed that students were moderately interested in school, but lacked engagement. Interviews also indicated that students wanted to do well in terms of their career goals. This seemed to be in opposition to their level of school interest. I derived this from the following student factors: response to questions when asked to rate level of school interest; overall absences of the group; cumulative GPA data; and future aspirations.

As reported in Chapter Four, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 the lowest and 5 the highest, none of the students rated their interest in school above 4. Almost half of them rated their interest at 2. Many students had several absences during the term prior to PBL, indicating problems in maintaining consistent attendance. In addition, the cumulative GPA for the group was below average. However, nearly all participants wanted to achieve career goals that required high skill levels and advanced training either through college level education or advanced technical practice. Students' motivation to achieve their career goals was also evident from most of their responses to the following question in the pre-study interview: What are your goals for the eight weeks of PBL sessions? Students wanted to acquire skills that could help them in school and

support their career goals after graduation. While it was unclear why, most of the students wanted to use the opportunity to help prepare them for college entrance. The fact that their GPA was low did not seem to deter them from pursuing goals, which included going to college. Students appeared confident that their goals were viable, but that they just needed support and time and space to accomplish them.

### **Post-study Interviews**

Post-study interviews indicated that PBL was an engaging process for these students. They wanted to keep the lab going in the form of a PBL club at school. In addition, they made plans to continue the business they started by selling their clothing and making plans to develop other merchandise. The seminal theme from this round of interviews was that students if given the choice, they preferred PBL to traditional school to implement aspects of the teaching model to their current classes. Other themes that emerged were that they felt connected in their work on the project. Teamwork was important to them as indicated by comfort level with each other, accepted accountability, and support they had for one another delivering the final presentation.

Attendance data taken from the term during PBL showed no improvement in terms of numbers of classes missed or how many times students were absent. This study did not show any positive impact of PBL on attendance. In part, that may have been due to the sessions after school having no direct bearing on in school success because of attendance. The students viewed the lab as an extension of the school day and saw it as an opportunity to prepare them for meeting goals that were unrelated to academic success in a particular class. The seven students who completed the project did show consistent attendance for the sessions. This may be an indirect indication for PBL positively affecting attendance.

## **Facilitator**

The role that Larry (the facilitator) played was very integral to the process. Larry, an African American, established a relationship with many of the participants prior to the study. He consistently implemented a PBL framework, which included strategies provided to him as a part of the methodology referenced in Chapter Three. The weekly Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) was administered to students and functioned as barometer for students' overall disposition and progress in school. The weekly CIQ was effective in its engagement of student feedback. That strategy did elicit information that was useful to keep the pulse of students' state of mind. Larry also employed several participatory activities that promoted group interaction and discussion. His successful dissemination of the theoretical framework was very evident. Larry's ability to engage participants through discussion about their interests relative to race, culture, and self-image demonstrated that he was employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a central element of the teaching process. One of the tenants of the theory, interest convergence (Bell, 1980), played an important role in the facilitation with the group. It may be an important factor to consider in the engagement of black male high school students. Considering the overall interest of these particular students, their GPA, and attendance, this convergence seems even more like a factor that should be included as a foundation for engagement.

During the study, Larry developed a distinct rapport with students in the group. They were open to participating and did not seem hesitant to share personal stories from the initial sessions to the ending session. This may have been due to Larry's ethnic background as a person of African American decent. This phenomenon is often the case when students perceive a common cultural connection with a teacher, allowing for trust to be built. In addition, he was familiar with at least a few of the students prior to the beginning of the sessions. It was also

evident that his ability to listen to students appropriately respond to their questions, and challenge them to think more critically were additional factors that helped him connect with students. He blended history, evidenced by bringing in an article about notorious slave plantation owner, Willie Lynch. This served as an example of the perceptions that blacks have toward other blacks and the hierarchy created on slave plantations with the purpose to control the slaves. Although some historians argue that Lynch was not responsible for creating that structure on plantations, the article Larry used painted him as a diabolical plantation owner and that point resonated with the group because it connected to some of the discussions they had about self-image, and how others viewed them both white and black. Moreover, the overarching theme of slave culture including “house” and “field” slave mentality has long been acknowledged.

The facilitator also provided a cultural context for the sessions by developing discussions specific to black male experiences in schools. This was the comprehensive approach explained in the methodology. Evidence of the third aspect of a comprehensive approach was demonstrated when a business plan template was provided by the facilitator. Once he covered the theoretic components for how to start a business, students gained valuable content knowledge that helped them make more informed decisions. More succinctly, they learned the steps necessary for starting a business and as a result expressed even greater interest in doing so. As this point, it became clear to Larry that the students wanted to head in this direction.

Larry’s daily plan time for facilitating the group was split between discussion-based activities and project development. Based on the dialogue and subject matter, he often had students engaged, fostering a great deal of critical thinking. This factor for teaching and learning purposes showed his belief that the students could handle the challenges that he presented them



with. He had expectations that he believed they would meet. His plan was also very flexible and important to facilitating this group's project.

### **PBL Impact**

The PBL session schedule had both positive and negative impacts on the case study. It promoted the necessary flexibility to allow participants to work at their own pace. There was transportation available through the after school activity buses. Each session was two hours in length, which was more than enough time for group discussion, reflection through CIQ, and project work time. Meeting twice a week offered time in between classes to provide resources necessary for continued project development. However, this may not have been any different if the sessions had occurred every day. Students also benefited by working on their projects when it required time outside of meeting times.

One of the drawbacks of meeting after school was that students had to juggle other activities with the PBL sessions. Two prevalent conflicts were sports and work schedules. The participants handled their conflicts with schedules very well. They often arranged schedules so they could come to the PBL sessions. Students demonstrated that they made a very committed effort to attend each session and that they wanted to complete the project. The after school schedule was a leading factor in why only seven of the original 14 participants attended most of the sessions and completed the project. It is hard to say definitively if the other seven students would have completed projects if the study had been conducted during the school day. The evidence of why they did not complete projects however is more consistent with the conflicts created by multiple after school activities.

Larry introduced the eight-week PBL sessions to participants. His grounding for how PBL would work in this case was done in such a way that students developed trust in the safety

and authenticity of the space. For example, students did not shy away from stating what they truly felt about their status and/or views towards certain teachers in the building. Part of being authentic was the openness to talk about race, ethnicity, and black male experiences without filtering the conversation. The guidelines also included an agreement to take each session seriously; setting realistic achievable goals that would be useful to each participant. They were comfortable with being honest without fear of retribution by Larry's authority or any other teacher in the school. They were learning to become empowered and unafraid to share their perspectives with teachers and authority figures. Equally so, they also freely identified which teachers they felt connected to, and engaged by, in their classes.

Further consideration and explanation of the facilitator's grounding guidelines included a clear explanation of what was going to happen. This proved to be the key to the depth and quality of engagement that took place between Larry and the students; they seemed to know where their boundaries were and what was expected of them in order to accomplish their intended goals. In fact, Larry quite often explained his role and how mutual respect was necessary. In addition, he emphasized an understanding of how language worked, reflecting the importance of words and how participants benefitted by understanding their power. He often stated, "The power of words lie in their definition." This point was also reflected by how students crafted their written proposal and summary of the project found in Chapter Four. Students chose the word "Teflon" to speak to their understanding of the resilience they had and needed to survive in a system that was not always working on their behalf – to help them succeed and excel in school. This showed a deeper level of sophistication by participants.

The students' level of sophistication carried over into their final project presentations. The preparation, attention to details, and professional approach implied that the students took the

assignment seriously. In fact, they wanted to continue their work after the PBL sessions ended. They explained that they would like to start a PBL club to continue working on Teflon Beehive, and to bring other students into an awareness of what they were doing and to help lead a cultural movement in the school. Furthermore, they filled out the proper school forms in order to get the club recognized as an official school club.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the findings in Chapter Four, I will address each of the three research questions. They are as follows: 1) How can contextual pedagogic practice help with the achievement gap of black male students? 2) As a form of contextual pedagogy, in what ways does project-based learning engage black males in school? 3) In what ways can project-based learning (PBL) help to address high suspension rates of black male high school students?

Regarding question one, findings revealed that there were several ways contextualizing student learning impacted achievement for the participants. In order to further understand this, perhaps there needs to be a shift in how achievement is defined. This study did not aim to measure whether specific test scores of standardized tests would increase for black males as a result of PBL. However, as referenced in Chapter Two, one of the causes for the lack of achievement on such tests was because of disengagement. In other words, if black males were not showing up for class, let alone fully engaged in the learning process, then achievement on tests would rank low. Since some lack of engagement for black males can be attributed to attendance, this study suggests that PBL at least better engaged the seven students who did not have after school conflicts.

I would concur with the results of Chambers (2009), Noguera (2008), and Kunjufu's (2005) research. They concluded that the achievement gap was perhaps more of an *opportunity*

*gap* for black males to demonstrate their improvement in a way that was meaningful to them.

My case study demonstrated that students were very engaged in their learning process. The key here was that the learning was more important than what they could demonstrate on a test, especially a standardized one. When provided the opportunity, participants achieved their objectives at a very high skill level. Students' motivation to succeed is explained in the following section by further addressing research question one.

There were several ways in which contextual pedagogic practice supported achievement in this case study. First, one of the key factors was that teaching was based on presenting students with real world situations based on their interests. When students attended class sessions, they were ready to learn and demonstrated their learning through discussion and project activities. The major reason for their full engagement was due to the fact that they were in charge of their own projects, which fostered ownership of their work. Students were given the freedom to be creative without limitation, which proved to be a very important factor for this study's success. In other words, none of their project proposals were rejected based on an arbitrary plausibility.

The motivation and creativity for young black males to start a business while still in high school should be met with flexibility and an open-minded facilitation. In this case, it was apparent student confidence level was a result of the fact that Larry did not attach a score on any assignment as compared to the kinds of tests students were accustomed to in other classes. The indicators of success for students were seen by how well they accomplished their stated project goals.

The second way in which contextual pedagogy aided learning was by how class sessions were structured. Sessions allowed participants to work toward greater understanding of the

material provided to them. Assessment of student learning was demonstrated through the depth of class discussions and quality of written work leading to project completion. To illustrate this achievement, I urge readers to consider the written explanation of Teflon Beehive in Chapter Four because of the metaphoric implications of its title relative to the context within which the concept was developed. The way the statement was constructed illustrated several layers of understanding by the group. It showed that they had a command for how to combine the use of language, grammar, communication, cultural awareness, and social context. It also proved they had the ability to frame their project in the midst of current social and systemic reality, given the spirit week episode. The potential for achievement beyond test scores was apparent due to the type of pedagogy employed. For example, PBL success was not measured by a standardized test, rather by the project meeting the stated objectives agreed upon by Larry and the students.

The third way contextual pedagogy aided learning was that it provided students with opportunities to achieve. That opportunity was mostly based on the interest of the participants. They demonstrated extra effort in order to determine their goals and prove that they could do the work for PBL. On two occasions, students demonstrated this characteristic. Henry attended a PBL session even though he was absent from school on that particular day. In addition, he and Vincent were using regular class time to work on their project, prompting a teacher to contact me with the concern that this project was drawing attention away from their regular class work.

Question two was, “As a form of contextual pedagogy, in what ways does project-based learning engage black males in school?” Participants were engaged by PBL as learners in several ways. The previous paragraph indicates in part how effective PBL was for participants. The fact that students began working on their projects at the expense of time in regular classes shows the extent of the engagement. Students completed work towards the final project even

though they were unable to attend all sessions. As mentioned above, jobs, sports, and a school suspension kept many of them from attending, yet students were highly engaged in sessions and regarded these absences as missed opportunities; they *wanted* to be there. Despite such absences, students communicated with each other. They created a contact list and used social media to communicate with each other as well. Larry also regularly informed them as to what they missed in a PBL lab. To make up for these absences, students completed tasks towards their goals outside of lab time so that when they returned to class, they could keep moving forward on their projects. Their effort outside of class was apparent based on discussions that ensued with each other and Larry when they returned to class.

During the course of the study, the use of Critical Race Theory played a foundational role in session facilitation and student engagement. Students were comfortable using race as a focal point for how they processed each discussion topic and/or subject. The implication here is that educators need to be willing and then prepared to gain necessary skills to support such conversations as a consistent part of engaging black males.

The Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) did seem to engage students. During the study, students were consistent in providing responses. Further, student check-ins reflected the pulse of where the group was at any given point. They wrote more descriptively and critically about teachers and other students. This was especially true when they perceived the actions of others to be unfair. Participants were also very positive towards Larry in the written CIQ because he cultivated a trustworthy relationship with them. This trust provided a way for students to give voice to both positive and negative experiences.

The quality of student's finished projects demonstrated a high degree of engagement. Developing a business plan demonstrated that students had a clear mission and vision. Their

plan also demonstrated the authenticity of student engagement and that learning was meaningful. Student interest was intrinsic because of the *real world* connection they made between their project and its application to their lives. If given a choice, the second round of interviews indicated that students preferred PBL.

Question three was, “In what ways can project-based learning help to address high suspension rates of black male high school students?” This case study did shed some light on the issue of school suspension; however, there was no direct correlation between data from this study and suspension rates. There was no disruptive behavior observed during the PBL sessions. Students followed and respected guidelines established by Larry. As indicated by much of the narrative in this chapter, students wanted to do well. Their motivation was to show up, be present, and get good results. The incentive was creating sustainable, organizational, and financial success. In the project explanation and post-study interviews, it was expressed by students that sustainability meant financial security. It also meant that people would be empowered so that the movement could potentially sustain without them. This point is reflected in how these students described how they wanted to put a significant portion of their profits towards creating a legacy for future students. That legacy would be in the form of scholarships to help students with ACT fees and preparatory classes, college admission fees, and entrepreneurial initiatives of future students. Organizational success for the group was reliant on their ability to assign each other roles for Teflon Beehive based on each member’s skill set and interests. Financial success for them individually varied. The larger theme for financial success was understood by them to be income that would provide a very comfortable lifestyle.

On the issue of school suspension, the suspension that actually occurred during this study deserves more in depth examination because of its relevance to these findings. On the one hand,

students were learning how to shift the paradigm for how they were perceived by successfully completing a project requiring many skills. In other words, they wanted to change a perception they felt that others had about them. Namely, that they were poor academically and were marginalized as black, getting kicked out of classes, not well behaved, and therefore less than qualified or prepared to succeed as well as whites. On the other hand, they butted up against policies that statistically suspends them disproportionately when compared to their white (or Caucasian) counterpart. These two points on the continuum collided. As they were attempting to change the above perception about black males, two of them were suspended. That hit the entire group very hard because they felt it was a slap in the face when they were trying to act in a positive proactive manner to confront racial issues in their school. It will be very important for educators and school leaders interested in this research to pay attention to this issue moving forward. Considering the data showing the disproportionate disciplinary consequences handed out to black males, schools need to gain the sensitivity and skills to have conversations with black students who want to bring issues about race forward. There may be a need to examine anti-racist practice and leadership. I will address this further in the implications and consideration for future research.

There is some indirect evidence that if black males are more fully engaged, behavioral problems may diminish. However, as stated earlier, high suspensions were not always the result of inappropriate behaviors; thus, the term disparity is a more appropriate word when discussing rates. This is due to different disciplinary outcomes for black and white students even when behavior infractions were the same.

The “Ghetto Spirit Day” incident, as described in Chapter Four by two PBL group members, involved white ski club members dressed in stereotypical black clothing using black



dialect when speaking. There was a subsequent suspension of two students involved, who both happened to be participants in this study. This provides more evidence of why a disparity is sighted by scholars. In other words, even though students had a positive reaction to PBL, demonstrating very little behavior problems, two of them still ended up suspended for five days. It did not matter that students went to the administration in a proactive way to complain about what they perceived as a racially stereotypic and insensitive act. It is due in part to the positive reception to PBL and Larry's facilitation that the students chose to handle the spirit day incident the way they did.

### **Implications**

To review, this was an instrumental case study. Its design allowed for transference of results to other cases with a similar phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Implications to teaching and learning are important factors to apply to other cases, particularly relative to student engagement. For example, the facilitator's role was very significant to the study. When considering PBL as a pedagogic strategy, schools should consider devoting a considerable amount of time to training and developing facilitators in a number of areas. Interest convergence emerged as a key theoretical foundation for engagement. Based on the findings in this study, interest should be one that both facilitator and student can converge on. In this case, it was the business plan for student projects, coupled with the facilitator's desire to see them succeed. Furthermore, CRT should be at the forefront in making learning meaningful for black males, especially in situations where a gap in achievement is evident. If such gaps exist and are predictable by race, then the interaction of race and learning may lead to teaching methods that promote more achievement, especially for black males, and in a variety of ways.

The flexibility in forming the grounding principles for PBL groups was important to building trust and fostering a sense of the community, both of which are essential to student learning. Trust and community building did take time to establish with some students. Part of this was due to some students missing sessions when they had conflicts after school. As a result, students had individual timetables in which the grounding took root. So, the guiding principle for how the process worked for each week of the study was established with each student on an individual basis. Once it did, students became supportive of each other and respected how each person contributed to the group.

Aspects of the PBL structure in combination with CRT provided a foundation, which supported camaraderie amongst the group and created “chemistry” in the group that was conducive to building teamwork. In addition, Larry’s demeanor, flexibility, and intuitiveness were essential to the group’s dynamics, making the completion of assignments and timelines for project obtainable. His overall approach created an expectation that students would finish the work. Larry accommodated students by allowing them to complete assignments at their own pace, while at the same time instituting a firm deadline for final presentations.

In the structuring of a model for using PBL, consideration should be given to using a school day that allows students the time to fully take advantage of learning the skills necessary to meet their objectives and goals. Given the premise that a majority of schools with significant black male populations are not PBL programs, schools can consider how to construct a schedule that allows for flexibility to offer PBL classes.

Implications for contextualizing learning through PBL were based on the premise that subject matter had to be relevant to students, which in turn generated substantive discussion. In the methodology, for example, a comprehensive model was explained. Historic, theoretical, and

cultural relevance were essential ingredients for black males when using PBL. Such ingredients are not only important when implementing pre-planned material, but there is the nimbleness to use resources as situations arise. An example from this case study was use of an article about Willie Lynch.

Discussion generated from the Lynch reading had a great impact on group engagement. It met the criteria for a comprehensive model by referring to a historical event that was relevant to current cultural phenomena. Hollie and Muhammed (2012) discuss culturally relevant teaching and employ strategies that involve validating and affirming students. In the affirmation process, students are heard when they speak or act, even if they digress from the topic or exhibit behavior that is counter to normal school culture. The inability to hear students played a significant role in the incident that led to the suspension of two students that was previously described. The Lynch article affirmed the students' views and how they saw the action against them. Gauging from what students wrote and shared in discussion, they did not feel affirmed by the assistant principal, whom they went to about their initial concern. The Lynch story also proved to be vital in the fact that it fueled these particular students in their pursuit of social justice (a major part of CRT).

If students bring racial issues forward, it is vital to gain a cultural understanding of why they do. School leaders need to consider the seriousness of such conversations, and establish processes that allow for students to be heard and act with practice that is equitable for all students. In that process, I would also recommend schools involve an equitable representation of its student body when developing discipline policies and the communication of such policies.

### **Future Research**

It is important to consider building upon this study in several ways. The fact that this study was primarily conducted after school hours provided some benefit. However, as a form of contextual pedagogy, it does not address the potential impact PBL might have on this population if integrated during the regular school day and across the curriculum. It would provide valuable content to the body of knowledge to research PBL as engagement for black males during normal school hours. One possible way to proceed with this research would be to do an expanded multiple site study.

The duration of the study was long enough to answer the questions posed. Further research might also entail a longitudinal study. Results might yield a more extensive and deeper look at PBL and its potential for enhancing student engagement. Similar to what was described above, another possibility might include implementing PBL as a lab class during the school day, for an entire school year, and applied across the curriculum. This would aid any effort to investigate explore PBL impact on test scores, including standardized tests.

Other thoughts to consider include applying this case study process to other minority populations such as Hispanics. Using CRT as a framework for groups that have similar disparities could inform educators about how to address school inequities; studies that compare the impact of PBL to integrated populations that include males and females, black, brown, and white. The thinking here is that both qualitative and quantitative research would be beneficial. Although the inclusion of multiracial groups of both genders potentially involves a different set of questions, it would be worth it to see how the PBL process works for black males within the larger groups. Moreover, would the other groups respond to this format with CRT as the framework in the same way? This question is important in looking at expanding this research with more in depth descriptions and discussions of PBL that are culturally relevant to other

subject matters such as math, science, and art. Perhaps there are studies that could be conducted on how PBL could be used in subject specific courses. Within these contexts, researchers could find out about interest convergence based on course subject interest; an interdisciplinary PBL approach to teaching math, history, music/art, writing, business skills (similar to what happened with the Teflon Beehive project).

The final project in this case study demonstrated that the skills required to be successful were integrated. As stated earlier in this dissertation, some school programs model a compartmental process to teaching and learning when subjects are thought of as part of different departments; math is taught by the math department, science by the science department, etc. Part of furthering PBL research in an interdisciplinary way would require studies that set up teachers as facilitators such as the role Larry played. Another way to look at this approach would be to consider teams of teachers to work together so that individual expertise could be used as part of the plan to facilitate PBL groups.

### **Closing Summary**

This study was a first step in examining the ways PBL impacts black male students toward eliminating the achievement gap. Achievement needs to be considered differently based on findings in this case. A further understanding of CRT and the comprehensive nature in which it was used is warranted. In this approach for black male students, there should be historical, theoretic, and cultural discourse as a part of the strategy to engage them.

Even though researchers have looked at culturally relevant and Afrocentric practices, there seems to be a point where cultural relevancy and skin color conflict. I would argue based on the spirit day narrative that it was not just the lack of cultural relevancy that led to the suspension; rather, that some pre-judgment based on skin color likely occurred due to a larger

systemic racism that exists within schools. This is not to say that administrators purposefully discriminated against black male students. There is, however, statistical data to support the phenomenon on a larger scale and its occurrence in this case. Therefore, educators need to be versed in both culturally relevant and anti-racist policies and pedagogic practices to promote equitable opportunities for black male students in high school. Project-based learning, along with Critical Race Theory as a framework, is a pedagogic approach not only to consider for student engagement, but it might also be a way to think about how antiracist practice could be used. More work would have to be done towards understanding this point.

It is my view that this case demonstrated that equality and equity is not the same. Equality is reflected in all students given the exact same measure of resource, learning material, etc. However, equitable practice involve understanding that underserved and underrepresented groups need more time devoted to educating them in some circumstances. In this case, because of the lack of interest, engagement, and attitude towards school in general, these students needed a more personal, one-to-one relationship with a teacher. PBL provided them with that in this study.

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**Appendix A**  
**Round 1 Interview Questions**

- 1) On a scale from 1 to 5, rate your interest in school.
- 2) List your favorite subjects in school and why.
- 3) What is your career goal?
- 4) What is your goal for the sessions you will be in over the next 8 weeks?

## Appendix B Project Proposal

Submitted by: Henry, Vincent, Heath, Nate, Yohan, Eddie, and Nene.

1. Title of the project: Teflon Behive
2. Steps for completion: file paperwork with the state; work on clothing designs and marketing strategies, contact and secure a printer for t-shirts, print the shirts and sell them
3. Resources needed: investment for business, computer software for graphic design, shirts, business cards,
4. Timeline for completion: Attached in notes

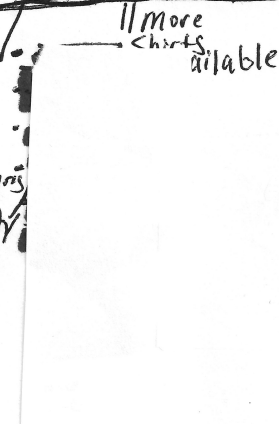
June 1 = 600\$ By selling 150 shirts.  
 \$ 600 = Goal \$/100+ week.  
 1. Shirt a Day.  
 We all need to sell a shirt a Day.  
 Beginning of May. Should have 600\$ in 5 weeks  
 after 5 weeks  
Steps: for Selling Shirts  
 Quota: Need to sell 25 shirts  
 a week 4 shirts a Day.  
 4

Priorities

- \* Ask consistently About Admission
- Get Website UP & Running / Figure out Domain
- Get more pictures for tbcx3
- For soundset Booth. □ Get copy Right info / We Need Way more pictures of Crew / teflon supplie
- Find videographer □ promote for T-shirts
- for tbcx3 promo vid. □ tweet About projects Comming Soon / Get tweets up.
- preorder/sell all □ 50 followers By Spring Brake.
- Shirts By end of week □ We Gotta Get a picture of shirt so I can preorder them.
- \* □ Create Like/Broff Pg. FB
- Find out how many shirts \* pre order list / possibilities.
- establish new Designs... for Later clothin Design

Thought

- Left to sell??
- Any Cultural Ideas? / cultural events)
- About to Be in Atlanta
- During spring Brake any pictures Cultural things to photograph
- promote for tbcx3. We Need a Business card. Anything I could Get Done While In ATL.



Twitter

- \* Shirts/Apparel Presented By tbcx3 Comming Soon.
- \* everyone Checkout Teflon Beehive.com
- \* □ figure out how to sell shirts on Website \* / more pictures of tbcx3
- \* Find Inspirational / Write on twitter. Get twitter Game up.

4# = 150 shirts  
2 = 300.

june 1

## 5. written summary:

Teflon Beehive is a Collective  
of Young energy.

We Are a movement based on  
Cultural awerness, revolutionizing  
Our generations paradime through  
InfluentiaL Creativity. We are a  
Brand that stands for the same  
Qualities as a beehive -

All of us working towards one goal  
and that's uniting all cultures.  
using Propaganda, education, and  
entrepreneurship/SUSTAINABILITY.

**Appendix C**  
**Round Two Interview Questions**

- 1) What was your experience with Project-based learning like?
- 2) Did you meet your goals for the class? Why or why not?
- 3) How does project-based learning fit with your career goals?
- 4) How would your view of school be if it was a PBL model?

**Appendix D**  
**Attendance Data**

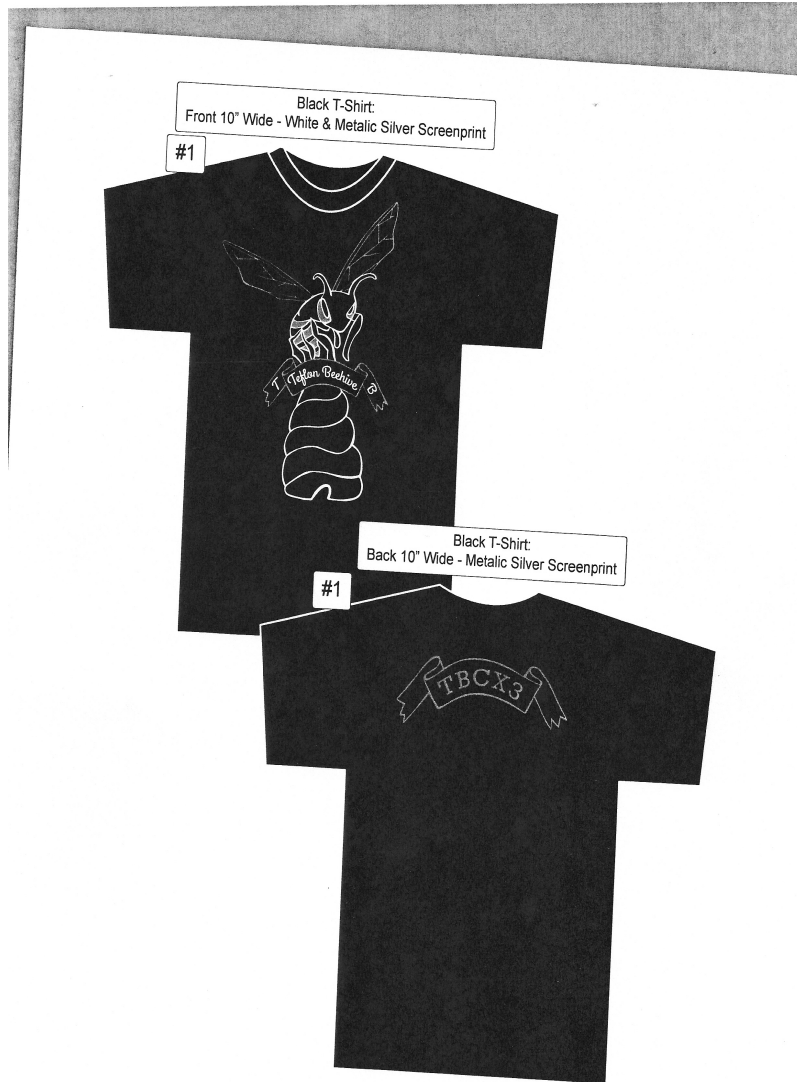
Student attendance data term 2 before PBL

STUDENT	GPA	BLOCKS MISSED	TARDIES
A	1.75	4	1
B	2.0	13	4
C	2.167	12	5
D	2.333	6	1
E	0.0	17	5
F	0.222	33	9
G	2.584	16	27
H	1.888	13	8
I	2.0	7	5
J	1.583	10	7
K	2.2	4	0
L	2.533	1	1
M	1.133	12	5
N	0.667	24	14

Term 3 during PBL

STUDENT	GPA	BLOCKS MISSED	TARDIES
A	1.0	6	0
B	2.417	11	4
C	0.25	33	7
D	2.556	22	4
E	1.889	8	9
F	0.417	87	8
G	3.417	29	30
H	2.917	17	5
I	2.111	11	6
J	0.778	7	13
K	1.556	5	0
L	2.333	7	1
M	1.556	4	8
N	2.0	26	15

## Appendix E Shirt Design and Business Card





## TEFLON BEEHIVE

TEFLON BEEHIVE | COLLECTIVE BASED ON  
CREATIVITY | CLOTHING | RAP MUSIC &  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

CONTACT INFO : [TEFLONBEEHIVE@GMAIL.COM](mailto:TEFLONBEEHIVE@GMAIL.COM)  
[TEFLONBEEHIVE.COM/.ORG](http://TEFLONBEEHIVE.COM/.ORG)

FOLLOW US AT [TWITTER.COM/TBCX3](https://twitter.com/TBCX3)

**Appendix F**  
**CIQ Questionnaire**

**Critical Incident Questionnaire**

At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?

At what moment in class this week were you most distanced from what was happening?

What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?

What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?

What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This can be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).