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# Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study Championing Justice

Dionne Cowan

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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, MEN OF COLOR EVADING THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY CHAMPIONING JUSTICE, by DIONNE V. COWAN, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

Janice B. Fournillier, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Nick J. Sauers, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Jesse L. Mason, Jr., Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

William L. Curlette, Ph.D.  
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy Studies

---

Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.  
Dean  
College of Education and Human Development

## **AUTHOR'S STATEMENT**

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Dionne Verniece Cowan

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Dionne Verniece Cowan  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Janice B. Fournillier, Ph.D.  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA 30303

## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

**Dionne V. Cowan**

### **ADDRESS**

30 Pryor Street  
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

### **EDUCATION**

Ed.D.	2016	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
M.Ed.	2005	Georgia State University Educational Leadership
B.A.	1999	Spelman College Child Development

### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

2014 – present	Associate Director Principals Center at Georgia State University Atlanta, GA
2012 – 2014	Director of Education Huntington Learning Center Alpharetta, GA
2011	Founding Principal Ivy Prep at Kirkwood for Boys Atlanta, GA
2010 – 2011	Seventh Grade Math Teacher Ivy Prep at Gwinnett for Girls Norcross, GA
2005 – 2008	Assistant Principal New Birth Christian Academy Lithonia, GA

## PRESENTATIONS

- Cowan, D. V. (2015, November). *Re-Imagining the School to Prison Pipeline: Leadership within Your Sphere of Influence*. University Council of Educational Administration Annual Conference, San Diego, CA.
- Cowan, D.V. (2015, April). *Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline*. 36<sup>th</sup> Annual David L. Clark National Graduate Student Research Seminar in Educational Administration & Policy Research, Chicago, IL.
- Cowan, D. V. (2014, April). *The school to prison pipeline: An investigation of the intersection of zero tolerance policy and practice*. 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Sources of Urban Educational Excellence Conference, Atlanta, GA.
- Cowan, D.V. (2003, October). *Math Feud*. 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Georgia Council of Teachers of Mathematics Conference, Eatonton, GA.
- Cowan, D.V. (2003, August). *Actualizing Systemic Change*. DeKalb County School System: Project Algebra Summer Workshop for Administrators, Stone Mountain, GA.
- Cowan, D.V. (2003, July). *Number Sense and Operations for Elementary Teachers*. DeKalb County School System: Project Algebra Summer Math Conference, Lithonia, GA.

## AWARDS

2015	David L. Clark Graduate Research Scholar University Council for Educational Administration
2004	Teacher of the Year, Redan Middle School
2000	Beginning Teacher of the Year, Meadows Elementary School

## PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

2014	Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, Member
2011	AdvancEd External Team Review Member

MEN OF COLOR EVADING THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY CHAMPIONING JUSTICE

by

DIONNE V. COWAN

Under the Direction of Janice B. Fournillier, Ph. D.

ABSTRACT

The school to prison pipeline (STPP) is a conceptual framework reflecting the injustice that bleeds at the intersection of the educational and criminal justice systems. By drawing on research from a variety of disciplines – including education, psychology, and law – the review of literature examined the contextual factors, including zero tolerance policy and practice, impacting the STPP. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of six men of color and their ability to evade the STPP. More specifically, this dissertation investigated to what capacity the leadership in the home, community, and school contributed to the six men’s ability to evade the grip of the STPP. Constructionism and critical inquiry framed this research that adopted a phenomenological approach. Using their voice and perspectives, the research portrays the men’s lived experience. It is hoped that these narratives can provide educational leaders and the larger society insight into how the six men successfully navigated the K-12 educational system. The key findings pinpoint the structures of support within the context of the home, community, and school that champion justice, success, and equity for boys and young men of color. This study reveals that there is a need for: policy and practice reformation, a closer

investigation of restorative justice, demonstration of culturally relevant leadership, and a call for justice.

**INDEX WORDS:** School to prison pipeline, Juvenile justice system, Zero tolerance policy and practice, Phenomenological study, Restorative justice, Equity and justice, Students of color, Culturally relevant leadership

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by

DIONNE V. COWAN

A Dissertation

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in

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in

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Atlanta, GA  
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## DEDICATION

*Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you*

*will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. -Philippians 1:6*

I am grateful to God for blessing me with family, friends, and a history of educators who have championed my success over the past thirty-eight years. I've always known that I was blessed to inherit the best of my mom's gifts and talents and the best of my dad's gifts and talents. Susan Cowan and William Cowan, I am forever grateful for the both of you and even more so that God has blessed us to share in *this* journey together! To my sister, Corianne Cowan, you have been an *amazing* support for me over the past three years, as I became a student again. You have read many of my papers and have been my personal editor and midnight hour thought partner. Thank you! To Darion Jackson, the best nephew ever, I will forever be *your* champion!

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## 1 THE CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IMPACTING THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

Dear Colleague,

On April 16, 1963, within the confines of a Birmingham jail, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. responded to his critics. His critics were fellow clergymen in Birmingham who questioned his presence in the city. These clergymen urged him to leave the fight for racial equality to the courts. He responded to them by writing on pieces of toilet paper because his placement in solitary confinement prohibited his access to writing materials. The contents of his letter are penned in *Letter From the Birmingham Jail*. King (1994) responded, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here” (p. 2). He poignantly explained, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (King, 1994, pp. 2-3). These words, encapsulated 50 years ago, ring true to the injustice of the disproportionate number of young men of color who fall victim to the *school to prison pipeline* (STPP). The STPP is one of the most critical challenges in education today (Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, and Patterson (2011) described the STPP as one of the civil rights issues of our time.

Echoing the words of Dr. King, “I’m here because injustice is here.” This injustice meets at the crossroads of the educational system and the juvenile justice system. This injustice is the school to prison pipeline. Chapter 1 examines the challenges for boys of color detailing the contextual factors impacting the STPP. This chapter unveils the purpose of the study and frames the context by exploring the historical and legal perspectives. It then intimately acquaints the reader with the review of literature from the lens of Jamal, a student, revealing the contextual factors of home, community, and school for students like him. Finally, this chapter concludes outlining the importance of this phenomenological study by pinpointing the gap in previous literature, sharing

the contributions of this study to the field of educational leadership, and detailing the study's significance.

## **Purpose and Context**

### **Focus Statement**

The Sentencing Project (2014) reported that Black students comprised 16% of all public school students; yet, they constituted 31% of school arrests. Barbarin (2010) further explained, "as a consequence of these high rates, the STPP is often invoked as a metaphor to capture the seemingly inexorable progression of African American boys" into the juvenile justice system (p. 81). Consequently, a statistical model is used to identify African American boys at the age of four and predicts the number of prisons needed to incarcerate them by their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday (Barbarin, 2010).

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of six men of color and their evasion from the school to prison pipeline. Smith's (2009) definition of the STPP will be highlighted for the purpose of this study:

A conceptual framework used to understand how policies and practices-primarily from, but not limited to, the education and criminal justice systems-intersect in a manner which cumulatively results in students of color being disproportionately pushed out of school and into prison. (p. 1019)

Hence, the aim of this study is investigate to what capacity the leadership in the home, community, and school contributed to the six men's ability to evade the grip of the school to prison pipeline.

Noguera (2003b) suggested, "there is considerable confusion regarding why being Black and male causes this segment of the population to stand out in the most negative and alarming

ways, both in school and in the larger society” (p. 433). Researchers (Casserly et al., 2012; Fowler, 2011; Hatt, 2011; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009; Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Shippen, Patterson, Green, & Smitherman, 2012; Togut, 2012) agree that we have a pervasive challenge in society with an overrepresentation of young African American males in juvenile detention centers and prison in comparison to an underrepresentation of their high school and graduation rates.

The damaging injustice endured by young men of color affects the greater good of the society. Moreover, Levin (2009) resolved, “educational equity is a moral imperative for a society in which education is a crucial determinant of life chances” (p. 5). In 1975, the Children’s Defense Fund (as cited in Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010) first set the stage, on a national scale, and addressed the racial disparities in education evident in the disproportionate number of African American students in school suspensions as compared to their enrollment rates in districts across the United States (p. 59). More recently, Smith and Harper (2015), in their study *Disproportionate Impact of K-12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States*, examined and unmasked that Blacks comprised 24% of students enrolled in public schools, yet were 48% of students suspended from public schools and 49% of students expelled. These scathing results were amassed from a sample size of 17,259,605 students and 1,494,519 suspensions cited from public school in 13 southern states.

Undeniably, there is an ethical and moral mandate to ensure that all children receive high levels of instruction. The educational landscape of our global society should provide for the successful outcomes and increased level of educational attainment for all children. Success, at high traceable levels within the educational and social justice landscape of society, for boys of color is missing within the fabric of our society. Darling-Hammond (2006) argued that in order to thrive

and prosper as a nation, the United States must relinquish any commitment to continue the educational inequities of the past and embrace the opportunity for all children to learn and succeed. King (1994) reiterated that as long as educational inequity exists, it unravels the single garment of destiny in the fabric and vitality of our nation.

### **Exploring the Historical and Legal Perspectives**

In order to more fully situate the phenomenon, there is a need to explore the historical and legal perspectives. More specifically, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (U.S. Supreme Court Center, 1954) and *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) require careful reexamination. The extensive history of segregation within the United States warranted an appalling and disturbing impact that extends into the educational system (Casserly et al., 2012). In the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (U.S. Supreme Court Center, 1954), the Supreme Court ruled separate schools for Blacks and Whites unconstitutional. However, many of the nation's schools, especially in urban areas, are still segregated by race and class. Furthermore, the Supreme Court decreed desegregation of schools "with all deliberate speed" (U.S. Supreme Court Center, 1954). Yet, children in this nation still wait for the deliberate speed of justice to be revealed within the educational landscape of the United States of America.

Additionally, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* stated it is the flagship program of the U.S. government for disadvantaged students designed to safeguard these students from being imprisoned in a failing school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Yet, populations of children, primarily in impoverished communities, remain trapped in low performing, unsuccessful schools. The significance of both events must be evaluated, given the current plight of today's disadvantaged students.

## Review of Literature

### The Literature Search Strategy

Garson (2012) recommended an analytical approach to the literature search. The literature search process for this review of literature began in June of 2013 and continued through February 2016. A computerized keyword search and citation examination of the most current year sources have been utilized with the objective of identifying articles and books addressing the contextual factors impacting the school to prison pipeline.

### Learning from Jamal

By drawing on research from a variety of disciplines— including education, psychology, and law - this review of literature investigates the contextual factors that impact the school to prison pipeline. More specifically, this review of literature will evaluate and analyze how factors, *within the context of home, the community, and the school*, impact a child's trajectory towards incarceration. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (2016) *Criminal Justice Fact Sheet* disclosed, "One in six Black men had been incarcerated as of 2011. If the current trends continue, one in three Black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime."

I'd like to introduce you to an African American young man by the name of Jamal. He represents one of the three Black males in the NAACP's aforementioned facts. Jamal's name has been changed to protect his identity. He is a student that I taught in a public middle school when I served as his eighth grade Algebra teacher. Jamal was consistently suspended from a school that flaunted and championed zero tolerance. He would return to my classroom, after being suspended for 5 days, and amaze me with his brilliant ability to catch up on the missed lessons. He had a brilliant mind and exhibited the characteristics of a natural born leader. I was disheartened

to learn a few years after teaching him in middle school that Jamal was convicted and detained in the juvenile justice system. Like Jamal, there are many young men of color who have been primed for the school to prison pipeline. As you read this review of the literature, I'd like for you to imagine with me: *What can school leaders do differently to change the trajectory for students like Jamal? Imagine.*

### **Contextual Factors Impacting the School to Prison Pipeline**

**Context of home.** The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Report: *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline* (2007) divulged that children and families represent a "complex amalgam of biological potential and environmental realities, of culture and family and community role models, of assets and risks" (p.17). When a child is born into this world, he/she inherits the attributes of race, class, and gender by no choice of his/her own. These attributes shape the type of home environment the child will have. Research suggests that there are key factors within the context of a child's home that influence their chances of falling victim to the school to prison pipeline.

**Socioeconomic status and poverty.** The body of research on children growing up in poverty revealed that certain elements impacted their chance of susceptibility of entering the STPP. High unemployment increased the amount of stress in families (Noguera, 2012); hence affecting the parent's relationship with the child. Children living in poverty attended school hungry, and the lack of adequate housing placed them at a disadvantage before they enter the doors of the classroom. Moreover, the lack of adequate housing increased the possibility of transiency with families by limiting stability and disrupting the relationships children had within their school community. Economically disadvantaged children are considered *at risk* and predicted to have challenges with literacy development (Rashid, 2009). Consequently, a lower socioeconomic status presumably leads to no, or poor, health care benefits. This deficit is evident in the form of no,

or poor, prenatal care resulting in a loss of preventative screening used to detect illnesses (CDF, 2007).

***Parental educational attainment level.*** Unmistakably, greater levels of educational attainment are closely linked with the receipt of no, or lower, amount of public assistance (Levin, 2009). Hossler and Stage (1992) reported how a parent's expectations, over the parents' educational level, proved to be the strongest influence on their child's aspirations. Furthermore, Samel et al. (2011) conducted a study following urban students in a cohort from seventh through twelfth grade. The purpose of the study was to examine the complexities of urban high schools and discover the resistors and contributors to academic success related to graduation rates. The findings of the study revealed variations in the parents' levels of educational attainment as small, calculated at 18%, across the three study subgroups: on time subgroup, alternative subgroup, and early exit subgroups (Samel et al., 2011, p. 114). Therefore, the researchers (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Samel et al., 2011) concluded that low parental educational attainment levels should not be used to automatically predict and conclude that the child's educational attainment level will mirror the parent's.

***Family composition.*** In the United States, it is becoming more common for children to live in single parent households than being raised by a married couple. Additionally, family composition is a consideration when examining parental resources. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (Forum, 2015) presents an annual report, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, designed to provide a summation of indicators of child well-being, and the Forum monitors the changes in the indicators over time. The Forum (2015) reported 64% of children, ages 0-17, lived with two married parents in 2014. In 2014, 74% percent of White children, 58% of Hispanic, and 34% of Black children lived in a two-

parent home. The statistics shed light on the inherited challenge of approximately 42% of Hispanic children and 66% of Black children growing up in single-parent homes. Moreover, the CDF (2007) predicted an increase in juvenile delinquency when the child is raised in a home with the following composition: single parent, teenage parent(s), alcohol or substance abusing parent(s), incarcerated parent(s), and/or foster parents (p.17). Children placed in foster care are at greater risk for neglect, sexual exploitation, anger, poor social relationships, and abuse (CDF, 2007). Statistics from the CDF (2007) solidified that twice as many Black children are in foster homes than expected, given their respective population among children in the United States. Children aging out of the foster care system are more likely to experience serious mental health illnesses (e.g. post traumatic stress disorder); less likely to receive sufficient health care; more likely to experience homelessness; less likely to graduate from high school or college; and more likely to be incarcerated (CDF, 2007).

**Abuse.** A review of literature on the academic and discipline gap included Kuther and Fisher's correlational study (as cited in Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010) showing a link between children's classroom behavior and their exposure to violence and their mental health status (p. 61). Moreover, children suffering from abuse or neglect without treatments are at risk of entering the school to prison pipeline. These elements, *within the context of home*, foreshadow the challenge that children may have before they arrive at school.

**Lessons learned from Jamal's home.** I saw several of the aforementioned factors play out in the life of my student, Jamal. As I reflect, his mother raised him in a single parent home in an impoverished suburban community. She shared with me her struggle to discipline him as he grew older and his physical strength overpowered her small frame. His mother had him as a teenager before dropping out of high school, and she admitted that his tendency to run the streets

increased with each three to five day suspensions. Consequently, as the institution of school pushed him out of school, inevitably he was pushed into the streets, as his mom was not able to supervise him during the day when he was suspended from school on numerous occasions.

**Context of community.** The review of literature reveals common threads from one context to another. Elements within the context of home are mirrored in the context of the community, whereby the community can represent an extension of the child's home. For example, Samel et al. (2011) proposed that certain elements, more specifically large percentages of parents with low levels of educational attainment, are endemic to urban communities.

*Urban areas with concentrated poverty.* Despite *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka* (U.S. Supreme Court Center, 1954), many children of color still attend schools segregated along the lines of race and class. Impoverished communities, many times being entrenched in chronic unemployment, placed children at a material disadvantage; yet, segregation in the Nation's communities prevented some children "from acquiring the knowledge, competencies, and social capital to thrive in the mainstream" (Barbarin, 2010, p. 84). Furthermore, many impoverished urban areas had *majority minority* schools that were simply underfunded when compared to suburban districts (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The majority minority schools received fewer resources than those educating children attending schools in wealthier areas.

The composition of a child's community may have an adverse effect on his/her classroom behavior. The review of literature by writers Gregory et al. (2010) exposed the adversity of students living in low-income urban communities. These students experienced greater susceptibility to violence and substance abuse (Gregory et al., 2010). This element is specifically linked to the adverse affects mentioned in the context of home as it relates to the element of abuse experienced by some children living in poverty.

Noguera (2012) addressed the need to counteract the influence of gangs on children living in impoverished neighborhoods. Children involved in gangs may not easily see the value and importance of building community in schools; thus, they may not build strong relationships with teachers and peers.

***Racial profiling.*** Highly segregated communities are consumed with low performing schools, insufficient social capital, disproportionate surveillance ultimately resulting in amassed arrests and inexorable treatment by the criminal justice system (Barbarin, 2010). Raible and Iri-zarry (2010) defined racial profiling as “the practice of targeting visible minorities for scrutiny by police or security” (p. 1199). Moreover, Smith (2009) shared New York statistics during 2006; when evaluating all stop and frisk encounters, 89% were performed on people of color. As a result, children of color are at an increased risk of being racially profiled in their own communities.

***Lack of community based interventions.*** Barbarin (2010) defined a *risky community* “as one that provides limited opportunities for development of children’s talents” (p. 86). Consequently, Barbarin (2010) cited elements, which contribute to risky communities. These elements included transience, low housing quality, overcrowding, and danger (Barbarin, 2010). Children surrounded by these communities are often powerless and unable to network and build relationships to help them successfully complete school and obtain a job or internship (Barbarin, 2010). The absenteeism of male role models, big brothers and coaches leave a void when guidance and mentorship are sorely needed (Barbarin, 2010).

Diversion programs, restorative justice, and professional development for community stakeholders (e.g. police officers, attorneys, and juvenile justice judges) are lacking in many impoverished communities (Shippen et al., 2012). Diversion programs are interventions designed to

reduce incarceration rates (Shippen et al., 2012). Professional critique on restorative justice “characterizes restorative justice as a set of values that emerge through a facilitated interactive process” thereby bringing “together victims and offenders” in hopes of righting the wrong with clear measures of “accountability and responsibility” (Shippen et al., 2012, p. 297). Police officers, attorneys, and juvenile justice system judges served as *front line service providers*, and their visibility and expertise place them as authority figures in the community (Shippen et al., 2012). In 2011, an International Association of Chiefs of Police Survey with representation from 49 states and the District of Columbia revealed that many states fail to mandate preparation for working with youth beyond basic preparation due to a lack of funding (Shippen et al., 2012). Providentially, the Juvenile Justice Law Enforcement Training and Technical Assistance Project began offering professional development at no cost to law enforcement agencies. Capacity building for frontline service providers presented a pressing need in order to fill the void created by the lack of ongoing professional development. There is hope that police chiefs will ensure that frontline providers receive the vital training.

***Lessons learned from Jamal’s community.*** Jamal lived in a community with concentrated poverty. There were very few opportunities for him to obtain a summer job in the community so that he could legally use his leadership and entrepreneurial gifts to serve his community. Sadly, the adults in the school strongly suspected that Jamal was dealing drugs. He ran the streets and had several encounters with the police. As I reflect, I wish he had the opportunity to direct and funnel his leadership and business skills in a way that benefitted his community.

**Context of school.** The review of literature revealed common threads from one context to another. Elements within the context of the home and the community clearly impact the context of the school, whereas the school represents an extension of a child’s home and community.

A school's leadership, school culture, and school climate clearly define, or fail to define, the culture for success, or failure, within the context of the school community. Fowler (2011) expressed the *bottom line*:

There is no better place than the child centered environment of a school for students to learn how to handle frustration and manage the host of negative emotions that are a part of growing up. That lesson is too important to leave to the courts. (p. 19)

Children need protected space wherein they are nurtured, educated and inspired to succeed within the walls of the classroom and beyond. When examining the contextual factors of the school, elements of the context of home and community consistently surface.

**Truancy.** Children with a record of inconsistent attendance are more susceptible to entering the STPP. Workers with the Truancy Intervention Project (TIP) identified truancy as a symptom of a larger societal problem. The majority of TIP students encountered poverty, single-parent head of households, and reliance on public assistance (Skola & Williamson, 2012). In essence, truancy is a “gateway into the criminal justice system” (Skola & Williamson, 2012, p. 405). Barbarin (2010) shared, once in the pipeline, it's difficult to emerge from it. Inevitably, unaddressed challenges of truancy became a precursor for dropping out of school.

**High dropout rates.** Inevitably, children with high numbers of disciplinary infractions eventually dropped out of school as they disengaged from school (Barbarin; 2010; Fowler, 2011). Samel et al. (2011) documented the challenges of students retained at least once; these students increased their chance of dropping out of school. Moreover, students' socioeconomic status, race, (dis)ability, behavior, and language proficiency were indicators correlated to dropping out of school (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). It becomes difficult to separate elements from the context of home (e.g. socioeconomic status and race) from the context of the school; in es-

sence, the elements are intertwined. Once a child drops out of school, he/she is placed on a trajectory for future criminal activity (Fowler, 2011). Accordingly, indicators for students on the dropout trajectory are evident before high school.

***Minority overrepresentation in special education.*** Raible and Irizarry (2010) shared an interest in educational injustice; hence, their review of literature urged educators to confront the STPP. Raible and Irizarry (2010) addressed the disproportionate number of children of color in special education classrooms. Moreover, Ford (2013) shed light on the injustice of the underrepresentation of children of color in gifted education. Togut (2012) admonished “by grouping children of color into ‘separate but equal’ special education classes and disproportionately suspending and expelling students of color, we have committed the cardinal sin of repeating a dark period in our nation’s history” (p. 180).

***Gender disparities.*** Barbarin (2010) examined feminization in early childhood classrooms. Many early childhood classrooms were taught by women and represented a feminized environment where boys were expected to be quiet and sit still. However, the instructional currency for boys is movement (Barbarin, 2010). This type of classroom proved to be disadvantageous and altered educational outcomes for boys of color. Boys of all ethnic and racial groups have been more likely than girls to receive exclusionary disciplinary sanctions; while, Black boys maintained the greatest risk for receiving these infractions (Gregory et al., 2010). Moreover, disparities related to discipline warrant further evaluation. Gender is a prevalent attribute that proves disadvantageous for young men of color looking to avoid the school to prison pipeline.

***Lack of teacher knowledge, competency, and professional development.*** In their study, Brown and Rodríguez (2009) examined the journey of two Latino adolescents, Angel and Ra-

mon, and their path to dropping out of school. In this account, the students experienced teachers denying access to appropriate curriculum and make-up work; a culture of low academic expectations; and racialized and gendered staff (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). Teachers served as *gatekeepers* to curriculum, therein setting up an institutional power structure of adults over students (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009).

In urban districts, teacher attrition rates have escalated resulting in a national teacher shortage in many critical areas (Howard, 2003; Raible & Irrizary, 2010). Howard (2003) surmised that educational leaders must critically analyze the cause for high teacher turnover rates and work collaboratively with licensing agencies, state departments and other districts to address the teacher shortage. To address this shortage, novice teachers have been disproportionately placed in front of children in urban, impoverished communities (Raible & Irrizary, 2010). Furthermore, teachers with lack luster classroom management struggled to engage at risk populations of students (Raible & Irrizary, 2010). Within segregated communities, the most at risk students lacked access to competent teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Finally, ineffective professional development has placed education's most needy children at a grave disadvantage for successful academic and behavioral outcomes (Houchins, Shippen, & Murphy, 2012).

***Mental health.*** Children with untreated mental health and emotional behavior problems have been primed for the school to prison pipeline (CDF, 2007). Untreated mental health issues proved problematic in schools, especially for educators lacking the training to effectively manage students with mental health challenges in their classrooms (Walter, Gouze & Lim, 2006). When children acted out, they were removed from the classroom and missed essential and foundational instruction key to their success. In the absence of successful school, community, and

family resources to address mental health issues, children are primed for the school to prison pipeline.

***Examining zero tolerance policy and practice.*** On January 8, 2014, in a joint effort between the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, Secretary of Education Duncan led the effort to publish *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*. Data collected nationwide by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights revealed, "youths of color and youths with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by suspensions and expulsions" (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. i). Duncan penned:

Suspended students are less likely to graduate on time and more likely to be suspended again, repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system. When carried out in connection with zero-tolerance policies, such practices can erode trust between students and school staff, and undermine efforts to create the positive school climates needed to engage students in a well-rounded and rigorous curriculum.

(U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. ii)

Duncan recommended that educational leaders and policy makers "proactively redesign discipline policies and practices to more effectively foster supportive and safe school climates" (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. ii). More specifically, the U.S. Department of Education (2014) outlined three guiding principles for educational leaders and policy makers for improving school climate and discipline: "(1) Create positive climates and focus on prevention; (2) Develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors; and (3) Ensure fairness, equity, and continuous improvement" (p. 1). This recent

*Guiding Principles* publication further validates the need for a review of the policy and practice of zero tolerance (ZT) and its impact on the school to prison pipeline.

The shift towards the policy and practice of ZT has led to the criminalization of student misbehavior (Alexander, 2011; Aull, 2012). Researchers (Aull, 2012; González, 2012; Insley 2001) revealed that juvenile crime had steadily decreased; however central office leadership shifted their discipline approach to the use of punitive or exclusionary disciplinary policies such as ZT. Aull (2012) argued that this “shift helped create a school-to-prison pipeline that is funneling students of color from substandard classrooms to shiny new prison cells” (p. 206). For more than two decades, school districts have implemented “harsher sanctions on students for minor disruptive behavior, such as tardiness, absences, noncompliance, and disrespect, resulting in a systematic and pervasive pushing out of students from schools and into the school-to-prison pipeline” (González, 2012, p. 287).

#### ***History of zero tolerance policy.***

*Discipline methods before zero tolerance.* Prior to the emergence of the ZT policy in the 1980s (Aull, 2012; González, 2012), school districts primarily used out-of-school suspensions and expulsions to address student misbehavior (Insley, 2001). However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, districts implemented the use of in-school suspensions; thus, students were able to continue their instruction at school while serving their punishment (Insley, 2001). By the early 1990s, ZT policy became the prevalent form of discipline (González, 2012).

*Media's push toward zero tolerance.* In 1999, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs' top ten list of news topics, school violence shifted from the third to the second most highly reported news topic in the U.S. (Insley, 2001). The three major network stations, ABC, CBS, and NBC, aired a combined total of 319 stories about the Columbine High School

shooting in Littleton, Colorado, which represented 54% of all murder stories reported in 1999 (Insley, 2001). One journalist, in a 1999 *New York Times* article (as cited in Insley, 2001), “observed that ‘anyone watching the news would find it almost impossible to believe that school violence has decreased’” (p. 1060). Moreover, the fear of the public was misguided, as statistics revealed school violence was on the decline, while the adoption of ZT policy was on the incline (Aull, 2012).

*Guns Free Schools Act.* Congress passed the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 (GFSA) during President Clinton’s Administration (Essex, 2001; Siman, 2004; Skiba, 2000). More specifically, the GFSA required states receiving federal funds to (a) require local districts to expel a student for a minimum of one year for bringing a firearm to school; (b) refer a student to the juvenile system for possession of a firearm on school property; and (c) include a discretionary clause, which allows the chief administrator of the district the opportunity to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis (Insley, 2001; Siman, 2004). Hence, states were not required to expel students based on this federal law. Furthermore, states were granted the option of providing alternative education for expelled students. The language, as outlined in the GFSA, only required ZT for possession of a firearm or explosive device; therefore, states were not forced to adopt a ZT stance related to other misbehaviors such as drugs and alcohol; disrespect towards authority; truancy; fighting; or any other misbehaviors not specified in the GFSA (Insley, 2001).

*Increased law enforcement in schools.* The Justice Policy Institute and Children’s Law Center (as cited in Insley, 2001) declared that the real threat to students stemmed from the adoption of zero tolerance policies that funneled students into the school to prison pipeline, not school violence itself. González (2012) reported that ZT policy represented a discipline approach mir-

roring the juvenile justice system, placing students at a greater risk of being disconnected from the school community and primed for the STPP. Siman (2004) shared that, in many instances, schools transferred their authority to discipline to law enforcement officers. González (2012) reported a 600% increase in school based juvenile court referrals for Clayton, Georgia after police officers were introduced in the schools.

***Implementation and controversy surrounding the zero tolerance policy.*** Aull (2012) described ZT policy as “a nondiscretionary approach that mandates a set of often-severe, predetermined consequences to student misbehavior that is to be applied without regards to ‘seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context’” (p. 182). Interestingly, this approach became the standard practice of how the ZT policy would be implemented in some schools. Moreover, the central office leadership of some districts decided not to adhere to the discretionary clause of the GFSA, allowing the chief administrator of the district the authority to alter the expulsion of a student on a case-by-case basis (Insley, 2001).

Skiba (2000) suggested that the methods of implementation, or practice, created controversy. The ZT practice of assigning suspension or expulsion has sparked cries of injustice across the nation (Skiba, 2000). Even though ZT policies have been widely implemented across schools in the nation, the ZT policy has been more prominent in majority minority, or predominately African-American and Latino, school districts (Siman, 2004).

***Legal rights of students.*** Siman (2004) recorded that litigants have voiced their concerns about the implications of due process as it relates to the ZT policy. Education is not recognized as a fundamental right in the United States Constitution; only a few states have guaranteed public education as a right by requiring alternative educational settings for students who’ve been sus-

pended from school (Insley, 2001). Hence, students across the nation are left without educational opportunities after being expelled from schools.

Essex (2001) advised central office leadership to find a subtle balance between ensuring school safety and the legal rights of students in their districts. Failure to heed this precaution has led to costly legal fees and legal challenges for some districts. Aull (2012) recommended that states implementing a ZT policy adopt preventative measures (e.g. utilizing the arbitration process) to ensure the protection of student's constitutional rights.

***Disproportionality in discipline.*** Exclusionary discipline practices are administered at the discretion of school leaders (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Fowler, 2011). These exclusionary practices include: detention, office referrals, suspensions, disciplinary alternative education placements, and expulsions. When children are excluded from, or pushed out of, the classroom a mass of negative outcomes is inevitable. Children in this scenario miss critical instructional time and educational progress is interrupted (Barbarin, 2010; Casserly et al., 2012; Fowler, 2011; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006), leaving students entrapped in the endless cycle of playing catch-up.

The move to push surveillance in schools influenced students' risk of moving from a school environment rich with surveillance straight to prison. Moreover, with the increase of zero tolerance policies, school disciplinary decisions have moved from the schoolhouse to the courthouse (Fowler, 2011; Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Student misbehavior has been criminalized (Alexander, 2011; Togut, 2012). However, Darensbourg et al. (2010) shared research in a literature review article finding zero tolerance policies unbeneficial to the students its intended to serve. The blatant, systemic pushing children out of school and into the streets, ultimately leads to the STPP. Finally, Skiba's (2000) examination of disciplinary practices revealed a disproportionate

number of students receiving the most severe punishments were classified as homeless, learning disabled, under a form of protective custody or foster care, or receiving free or reduced lunch.

*Racial disproportionality.* A vast body of research reported that children of color suffer disproportionate disciplinary infractions in America's schools (Barbarin, 2010; Casserly et al., 2012; Cole & Heilig, 2011; Fowler, 2011; Gregory et al., 2010; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Skiba, 2000; Smith 2009; Smith & Harper, 2015). Raible and Irizarry (2010) agitated the status quo in their reference to the findings of Harvard University's Civil Rights Project 2003 Conference. One finding illustrated how "racial disparity in school discipline and achievement mirrors racially disproportionate minority confinement" within the context of the larger society (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1199). Subsequently, zero tolerance policies have also increased the representation of students of color and students with disabilities in the juvenile justice system (González, 2012).

Moreover, Fowler (2011) affirmed that such disciplinary sanctions adversely affect African Americans and students with disabilities. Two thousand elementary students received Class C tickets in Texas during the 2008-2009 academic years (Fowler, 2011). A majority of the tickets were issued for classroom misconduct not criminal law breaking behavior (Fowler, 2011). Statistics revealed, "African American students are referred for misbehavior that is both less serious and more subjective in interpretation than white students" (Fowler, 2011, p. 18).

Over the course of the past two decades, juvenile crime has decreased; yet, exclusionary discipline practices in public school have increased (Cole & Heilig, 2011), mirroring that of the criminal justice system. Consequently, several researchers (Casserly et al., 2012, Cole & Heilig, 2011; Darenbourg et al., 2010, Fowler, 2011) reported more troubling findings of the increase

of disciplinary sanctions and its disparate impact on students of color and students with disabilities.

Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009) conducted a study involving a cross sectional time series model over a two-year period with a sample spanning 53 counties in Missouri. Their findings revealed a disproportionate racial pattern of exclusionary discipline practices and contact with the juvenile justice system after controlling the variables for poverty and urbanization (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). More specifically, Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009) indicated that African American students, when compared to their White counterparts, were targeted more often for out of school suspensions when committing the same type of offense. Youth surveillance (e.g. metal detectors, security officers housed in schools, and cameras) in schools, coupled with the absence of social justice in education, bolstered the growth of the school to prison pipeline (Raible & Iri-zarry, 2010).

*Gender disproportionality.* Over the course of three years of fieldwork at Rosa Parks Elementary School in Arcadia, California, Ferguson (2000) observed how “children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers . . . (yet) there were also tracks for some children, predominantly African American and male, that led to prison” (p. 2). Hence, some African American males were disproportionately tracked into futures as prison inmates. Moreover, Barbarin (2010) examined feminization in early childhood classrooms. Many early childhood classrooms, taught by women, represented a feminized environment where boys were expected to remain quiet and still; however, the instructional currency of boys is movement (Barbarin, 2010). This type of classroom proved to be disadvantageous and negatively altered outcomes for boys. Boys of all ethnic and racial groups have been more likely than girls to receive exclusionary disciplinary sanctions; while, black boys had the greatest risk for assuming these sanctions (Grego-

ry, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Consequently, the social constructs of race and gender can serve as a disadvantage for young men of color looking to avert the STPP.

*Socioeconomic disproportionality.* Brantlinger (1991) detailed how adolescents, from both high and low socioeconomic statuses, reported that disciplinary practices were unethically weighed against adolescents classified in a lower socioeconomic status. Adolescents with a high socioeconomic status commonly reported receiving milder and moderate consequences (e.g. change of seating in classroom, teacher lecture); whereas, adolescents with a lower socioeconomic status disclosed enduring more severe consequences, at times, delivered in an unprofessional manner (e.g. removed from the classroom and placed in the hallway all day, personal items searched, embarrassed or scorned in front of peers) (Brantlinger, 1991). Noguera (2003a) highlighted, “too often, schools react to the behavior of such children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the factors responsible for their problematic behavior” (p. 342).

*Exclusionary practices: suspension and expulsion.* The exclusionary discipline practices of suspension and expulsion have been central features of ZT policy and practice (Skiba, 2000). ZT policy and practice promoted the aforementioned exclusionary practices, and data on both measures have been extensive with a lack of support for positive educational outcomes and opportunities for children. Noguera (2003a) contended, “it is ironic and telling that schools typically punish children who are behind academically by depriving them of instructional time” (p. 345).

*Questions regarding the effectiveness of zero tolerance policy and practice.* There is a gap in the literature of documentation linking ZT with an improvement in school safety. Skiba (2000) analyzed how after ten years of implementing ZT policy and practice, only research on school uniforms provides support signifying contributions to a safer school environment. Moreo-

ver, more extensive studies by Mayer and Leone (as cited in Skiba, 2000) suggested a negative correlation between increased security measures, as encouraged by the adoption of ZT policy and practice, and school safety.

Testimony from three public hearings in Massachusetts on the impact of school discipline revealed “excessive disciplinary action for non-violent offenses, such as tardiness and truancy, exacerbates the dropout crisis” (González, 2012, p. 296). More damaging effects of ZT policy and practice have been documented, such as: a student’s increased risk for juvenile delinquency (Siman, 2004), interference with educational progression and perpetuating a cycle of failure (González, 2012), a decrease in academic achievement (González, 2012), an increased likelihood of special education placement (Siman, 2004), a decreased participation in extracurricular activities (Siman, 2004), adding to the growing number of citizens without a solid educational foundation (Insley, 2001), a threat in social development (Siman, 2004), and students from the Los Angeles Unified School Districts expressed receiving truancy tickets created pre-prison conditions in their schools (González, 2012).

***Summarizing zero tolerance.*** “The dilemma of ZT is profound and serious” (Skiba, 2000, p. 16); its repercussions are severe when children’s lives have been irrevocably scarred by a policy that was initially aimed to punish more serious offenders. Consequently, ZT policy has resulted in discriminatory practices against students of color. This damaging injustice endured by children adversely affects the greater good of society.

***An alternative approach to zero tolerance: restorative justice.*** The school to prison pipeline has been labeled as “one of the most pressing civil and human rights challenges” of our time by policymakers, educational leaders, activists, lawyers, and scholars (González, 2012, p.

292). The ZT policy has proven ineffective as a corrective measure. Pavelka (2013) presented a policy alternative to the zero tolerance policy per the depiction of restorative justice.

The task of “aligning a school system towards a more restorative response requires strong leadership, vision, and empowerment among administrators” (Pavelka, 2013, p. 17). Central office leadership is challenged with the task of establishing a vision for the students entrusted in their care. It is advisable that school boards adopt the restorative justice policy and central office leadership implements the practice of restorative justice, instead of ZT policy, in order to enhance school culture and build a more peaceful and just school community. Ultimately, school leadership must build the capacity of all stakeholders (educators, students, parents, and other community members) to actively engage in the process to restore by collaboratively addressing the wrongdoer, wrongdoing, and the reparation.

*Lessons learned from Jamal’s school.* As I conducted this review of the literature, I reflected on the following questions: What if Jamal had the opportunity to grow and develop in a school community that embraced restorative justice instead of zero tolerance? What if he had a mentor in the school, preferably an adult that he connected with? What would his academic journey look like if he weren’t retained in seventh grade? What if he wasn’t deprived of so much instructional time? *What if?*

### **The Importance of this Phenomenological Study**

#### **Gap in the Literature**

The review of literature revealed the policy and practice of restorative justice as a possible initiative aimed at aiding the dismantling of the STPP (Pavelka, 2013). However, the literature reviewed did not reveal a qualitative examination of individuals who have evaded the grip of the STPP. Consequently, this dissertation study explored the impact of leadership – through the

contextual lens of home, community and school – on the men’s successful navigation through the educational system, void the stain of the juvenile justice and/or criminal systems. The connections between the contextual factors are evident and inextricably tied up, one within the other. The evaluation of challenges faced by educational leaders within the school can only be examined by taking into account the three contextual factors: the context of the home, the context of the community, and the context of school.

### **Contributory to the Field of Educational Leadership**

The shift towards the policy and practice of ZT has led to the criminalization of student misbehavior (Aull, 2012). Researchers (Aull, 2012; González, 2012; Insley 2001) revealed that juvenile crime had steadily decreased; however central office and school leadership had shifted their discipline approach to the use of punitive or exclusionary discipline policies such as ZT. Aull (2012) argued that this “shift helped create a school-to-prison pipeline that is funneling students of color from substandard classrooms to shiny new prison cells” (p. 206). Hence, this study examined the nature of the lived experience of six men of color, who were in school during the federal implementation of zero tolerance policy, whom evaded the school to prison pipeline.

### **Significance of Examining This Phenomenological Study**

An evasion from the school to prison pipeline can only be measured after one successfully matriculates through the educational system without being tainted from the stains of the juvenile justice system or having gone to jail. In chapter 2, I will share the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline. This study provides educational leaders and the larger society insight from the men documenting how they successfully navigated the educational system from their perspective, using their voice. You will discover the leadership

contributions within the context of the home, community, and school toward this accomplished end.

### **Conclusion**

The confluence of the contextual factors, within the home, community and school, impact the STPP. The connections between the contextual factors are evident and inextricably tied up, one within the other. The evaluation of challenges faced by educational leaders within the school can only be examined by taking into account the three contextual factors: the context of the home; the context of the community; and the context of school.

Ferguson (2000) summarized the charge best stating “perhaps, allowing ourselves to imagine the possibilities - what could, should, and must be - is an indispensable first step” (p. 235). Imagine a school where the residue of racial profiling is abolished. Imagine a resource rich school community where students are present, engaged, nurtured and challenged. Imagine a school where, regardless of race, class, and gender, all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Imagine a school where teachers possess cultural competency and experience ongoing professional development designed to support and close any academic, discipline, and opportunity gaps. Finally, imagine as Shippen et al. (2012) imagined, educators carrying “the torch of justice and equity for those who seemingly hold no power or influence” (p. 305). Imagine.

Yours for the cause of educational equity,

*Dionne V. Cowan*

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## 2 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: CHAMPIONING JUSTICE

Dear Colleague,

The *school to prison pipeline* (STPP) is a phenomenon that can cripple the very existence of students of color. When policies and practices intersect in such a way that students of color, males in particular, are disproportionately primed for prison instead of successfully matriculating through high school and college (Smith, 2009; Togut, 2012), educational leaders are charged with creating a culture and climate conducive to the success of all students (Casserly et al., 2012; Fowler, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

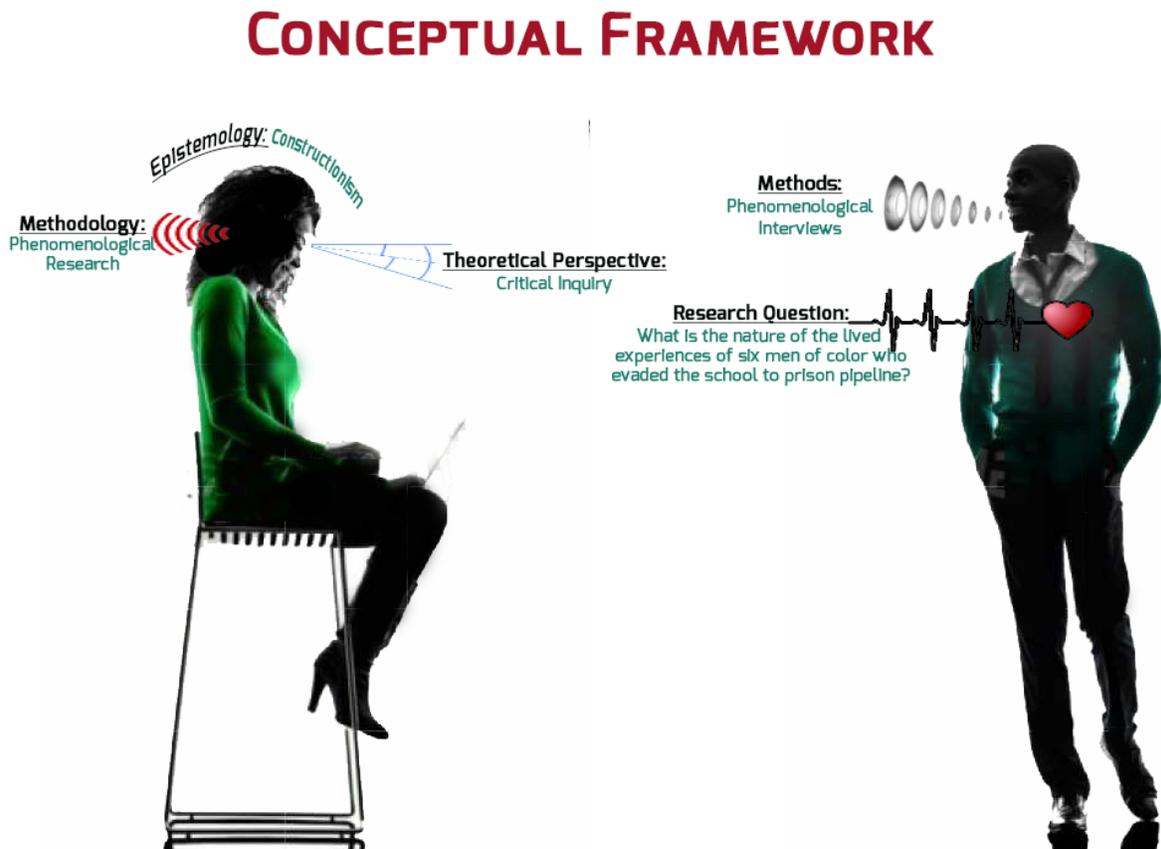
In chapter 1, I examined the challenges for boys of color detailing the contextual factors impacting the STPP. Chapter 2 unveils the promises and practices of leaders within the context of home, community, and school that supported six men of color as they evaded the STPP. This chapter adds to the movement to change the narrative for boys and young men of color as it relates to the staggering statistics uncovered in the literature review. I will introduce you to Kingston, Danny, William, Grant, Albert, and Joshua. Additionally, you will be afforded the opportunity to glean from four of their champions, men who played an influential role in their successful navigation of the K-12 educational system and beyond.

This chapter details the research design of this study explaining my worldview, values, and beliefs that guided the methodological approach. It then presents a narrative portrayal of four men of color, unveiling their lived experiences. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the discussion of the major findings, implications for educational leaders, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of this study.

## The Research Methodology

The research methodology commences with the selection of a topic and a paradigm. In essence, a paradigm reflects the researcher's worldview and values, frames his/her beliefs, and guides the methodology for how the researcher works. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) defined the qualitative research paradigm, through the lens of the researcher's worldview, as "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (p. 157). This section of Chapter 2, and Figure 1 below, detail my epistemological assumption, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods as well as the justification for the selected research design and its process.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



## **Epistemology**

Crotty (1998) shared that researchers prescribe to different epistemological assumptions; moreover, researchers generally prescribe to distinct camps: objectivism, constructionism, or subjectivism. A researcher's epistemology, or theory of knowledge, serves as a guide on how the social phenomena will be researched and explored. Crotty (1998) portrayed constructionism in the following light:

It is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (p. 42)

My constructionist epistemological position is based upon my desire to *construct* meaning centered around the possibility of finding solutions to dismantle the school to prison pipeline and assist young men in their journey as they, too, evade the school to prison pipeline. As an educational leader and researcher, I desire to link the knowledge from the findings of the phenomenological study to action that might result in policy and practice changes within school systems. Therefore, the leadership roles, within the context of the home, community, and school, were examined.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical perspective, informed by the epistemological assumption, conveys “our view of the human world and social life within that world, wherein such assumptions are grounded” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). The spirit of critical inquiry, rooted in social justice, calls “current ideology into question” and initiates action (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). The repeated idea that boys and men of color are less than, inferior, and incapable of achieving in school and serving

their communities and the greater society is the current ideology and practice of some educational leaders that I choose to call into question. This phenomenological research initiated action to delve into their lived experiences of successfully navigating the educational K-12 system and evading the school to prison pipeline.

Moreover, Crotty (1998) established a backdrop for critical inquiry as a theoretical perspective stating, “[it] keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice” (p. 157). Hence, this study delved into the power relationships within the context of home, community, and school. Ultimately, the results and key findings of this study revealed the promising practices of those who championed justice on their behalf.

## **Methodology**

The methodology embodies the strategy that the researcher will utilize to approach the research. Schwandt (2001) prescribed that methodology “involves an analysis of the assumptions, principles, and procedures” (p. 161). Hence, the decision to pair phenomenological research as the prescribed plan of action with the theoretical perspective of critical inquiry was intentional in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

**Phenomenological research.** Moustakas (1994) advised that the aim of a phenomenological study “is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). This empirical study engaged the participants in returning to their experiences to obtain their rich, in-depth descriptions of it. Consequently, the investigation yielded the essence of the lived experience of six men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline.

Moustakas (1994) illustrated phenomena as “the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge;” “any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for an investigation” (p. 26). The school to prison pipeline is a building block of critical inquiry and the defined starting point for this phenomenological study. The review of literature revealed the contextual factors impacting the STPP narrowing the focus of my research questions. The organization of the contextual factors into the categories of context of home, context of community, and context of school served as the basis for the assumptions of my investigation. Hence, this study was intentionally designed to investigate the roles leaders in the home, community, and school played in the men’s successful navigation of the educational system and beyond evading prison.

### **Researcher’s Role in the Design**

Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) challenged researchers to select a topic that has “both social meaning and personal experience” (p. 104). Joubish, Khurram, Ahmed, Fatima and Haider (2011) also described the role of the researcher as “the instrument of qualitative inquiry, so the quality of the research depends heavily on the qualities of that human being” (p. 2084). This phenomenological study had significant meaning for me, both personally and professionally. After seventeen years of serving as an educator and seeing young men, like Jamal who I introduced you to in Chapter 1, become a victim of the STPP, I decided I wanted to investigate and join the movement of changing the narrative surrounding boys and young men of color. Suitably, I consider myself an instrument. I am constantly being shaped and transformed by my personal, professional, and educational journey. In phenomenological research, “the researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search”; whereby, “personal history brings the core of the problem into focus” (Moustakas, 1994, p.104). One of my life’s goals is to become a masterfully crafted instrument helping to build a legacy of educational equity.

During the summer of 2004 while working on my Master of Education degree at Georgia State University, I grappled with the pages of Ferguson's (2000) *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. The themes of injustice and low expectations articulated in this qualitative portrayal of young men of color were all too familiar. I have witnessed the same injustice in the lives of my family members and students that I love and have taught. Ferguson's (2000) case study, including the findings and implications for future research, beckoned me to a place of questioning, anger, soul searching, and ultimately seeking answers. One of my college mentors shared with me, "Dionne, have you ever considered that the very thing that angers you the most, may be the very thing that you're called to change?" My personal history as an educational leader reveals my laser focus and uncovers why I am passionate about creating and supporting exceptional educational opportunities for boys of color. I consciously made the decision to pursue phenomenological research, as it aided in the development of the research questions focusing on the men's lived experiences.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of the lives of six men of color and their evasion from the STPP. Smith's (2009) definition of the STPP was highlighted for the purpose of this study:

A conceptual framework used to understand how policies and practices-primarily from, but not limited to, the education and criminal justice systems-intersect in a manner which cumulatively results in students of color being disproportionately pushed out of school and into prison. (p. 1019)

The central question guiding this phenomenological study was: *What is the nature of the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline?* In addition, the following sub question was addressed:

- a. What roles do the leadership in the home, community, and school play in the men's successful navigation of the educational system and beyond?

The men's lived experience of effective or ineffective leadership, within the home, community, and school, was explored. Phenomenological research provided a reflective return to the men's home and upbringing, community involvement and engagement, and the educational experiences of the participant's lives. In essence, as the men returned to their lived experiences, together we constructed meaning of their ability to successfully navigate the K-12 educational system and evade the school to prison pipeline.

## **Methods**

Crotty (1998) detailed methods as "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to" the research question (p. 3). With a targeted goal of "deriving scientific evidence" during this phenomenological investigation, I established and carried "out a series of methods and procedures" satisfying "the requirements of an organized, disciplined and systematic study" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 103). Phenomenological interviews for the six men and open-ended interviews were utilized as the method of inquiry for this investigation. Furthermore, the following section outlines the data sources, data collection, and the data analysis process used to conduct the study.

**Participants.** Six African-American men were recruited to participate in this phenomenological study. For phenomenological research, Giorgi (2009) recommended a minimum of three participants; however, six men of color were selected as participants in this study to allow

for a broader and richer investigation of the research questions. The primary strategy employed for recruiting the six men of color was networking with colleagues and providing recruitment informational emails until the sample size of six participants was reached meeting the pre-set criteria. The following criteria was used when recruiting participants: male of African or Latino descent, age range of 18 – 41 (seeking participants who were in school since the onset of zero tolerance policy) (Aull, 2012; González, 2012), high school graduate having attended public school for middle and/or high school, no involvement with the juvenile justice system, and no jail time.

I initiated the assistance of colleagues from my many networks to assist with recruitment efforts. A Recruitment Letter (see Appendix A) was emailed providing details of the study and contact information for any potential referral. I utilized colleague's referrals and conducted phone interviews to determine which six individuals would serve as the best fit for participants in this research effort.

***Participant selection, setting, and sampling.*** The Participant Eligibility Form (see Appendix B) was utilized during the phone interviews to ensure that all participants met the aforementioned criteria. The phenomenological interviews took place in the participants' contextually rich, everyday setting of home or work. After conducting phone interviews with a total of ten men, a sample size of six men meeting the criteria was achieved.

Barbour (2011) detailed that purposive sampling “offers researchers a degree of control rather than being at the mercy of any selection bias inherent in pre-existing groups” (p. 1116). Participants were selected utilizing purposive sampling. The selection of the six men for this phenomenological study was meaningful, calculated and deliberate. The participants were fully engaged in the research process and earnestly interested in understanding the nature of the phenomenon and its meanings, “willing to participate in a lengthy interview”, granted me permis-

sion to audio record, and to “publish the data in [this] dissertation and other publications” or conference presentations (Moustakas, 1994, p. 107).

Finally, I solicited the opportunity to interview a person of influence in the lives of the six men of color in order to gain better insight into what roles the leadership in the home, community, and/or school contributed to the men’s successful navigation of the educational system and their ability to evade the school to prison pipeline. An Influential Leader Recruitment Flyer (see Appendix C) was shared with each of the six men in hopes that they would place me in contact with an influential leader in their life. Four of the six men granted me access to a person of great influence in their life. Hence, a total of 10 participants participated in this study. Table 1 details the pseudonyms, categories, and ages of each participant.

Table 1  
*Participants*

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Man Evading the STPP or Influential Leader	Age
1	Grant	Man Evading STPP	37
2	Albert	Man Evading STPP	36
3	Albert’s principal	Influential Leader	68
4	Danny	Man Evading STPP	33
5	Danny’s father	Influential Leader	75
6	Kingston	Man Evading the STPP	30
7	William	Man Evading STPP	36
8	William’s coach	Influential Leader	75
9	Joshua	Man Evading STPP	41
10	Joshua’s father	Influential Leader	68

***Ethical principles.*** Ethical considerations for this study included adhering to the guidelines as established by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Informed Consent Forms for the men of color (see Appendix D) and the influential leaders (see Appendix E) was reviewed with each male participant in person and each influential leader by phone. Their signature was obtained before the interviews commenced. The influential leaders received an Influential Leader Recruitment Flyer (see Appendix C) detailing how to contact me. Their privacy was protected allowing them to directly contact me. The six men evading the STPP served as the first point of contact for each potential influential leader interview. I contacted each influential leader after permission was granted.

To mitigate any potential breach of confidentiality, the participants remained anonymous and selected their own pseudonym in order to conceal his identity. Finally, the Informed Consent Forms, for both the men of color and their influential leaders, outlined the following information: the purpose of the research; the procedures of the research; the risks and benefits of the research; the explanation that the research is voluntary; the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time; explanation of confidentiality; and the contact information of the principal and student investigator.

**Data collection.** I, as the student investigator, collected data through in-depth phenomenological interviews with the six men absent from the imposition of a guiding hypothesis. Participants granted me permission to audio record all interviews.

**Interviews.** Customarily, "in the phenomenological investigation the long interview is the method through which data is collected" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). The interviews are intentionally designed to be informal, engaging, and interactive. A prepared general interview guide, or protocol, as prescribed by Kvale (1996) for phenomenology was utilized. I created an Inter-

view Protocol (see Appendix F) designed to facilitate the phenomenological interviews. The protocol served as a guide; I still had the freedom to vary, alter, or omit as the participant shared their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Each man evading the STPP participated in three, 60 to 90 minutes phenomenological interviews. These 18 interviews yielded 12 hours and 34 minutes of audio recording coupled with 185 single-spaced pages of transcribed interviews. Moreover, the four identified influential leaders participated in one open-ended interview lasting an average of 34 minutes. These four interviews yielded two hours and 14 minutes of audio recording coupled with 26 single-spaced pages of transcribed interviews. My Data Collection Chart (see Appendix G) provides an overview of the 22 interviews yielding 14 hours and 48 minutes, the dates and times of each interview, and 211 single-spaced pages of transcription data.

***Representation of the data.*** The phenomenological interviews yielded a wealth of data detailing the lived experiences of six African-American men who evaded the school to prison pipeline and four influential leaders in the lives of four of the men. I invested five months of my time personally transcribe the 22 interviews. This process took approximately 110 hours and proved to be intense, yet very rewarding. It was rewarding as it allowed me the opportunity to once again face the raw emotions of each interview ranging from joy, hurt, excitement, pain, bewilderment, and reflection of each interview with each man. Furthermore, I also invested five months into analyzing the interview data. This analysis included journaling the highlights of each interview after I completed the transcription of the interview. When it came time for me to identify the invariant horizons and themes (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122), I was able to readily identify them because I had been so intimately acquainted with my data.

***Trustworthiness and credibility.*** Rigor and trustworthiness underlie sound qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guba & Lincoln (1982) described credibility through the following lens: researchers ask their participants whether or not their realities have been accurately described. As a first step, I provided a copy of all interview transcriptions to each participant and asked that they verify them for accuracy. The ultimate test, “Do the data sources (most often humans) find the inquirer’s analysis, formulation, and interpretations to be credible (believable)?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 246). Assisting with validation of the data, the participants received an analysis of the data along with a request to review it for accuracy and make recommendation(s) for any necessary changes (Moustakas, 1994). At the conclusion of the phenomenological interviews, each participant received a thank you letter (see Appendix H) “for their contribution to the knowledge of the nature, quality, meaning, and essence of their experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 109).

### **Data analysis.**

***Method of analysis.*** The following method of analysis was employed for this investigation. Moustakas (1994) derived a modification of the “methods of analysis suggested by Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975)” (pg. 121). I have provided the detailed steps in the order of the analysis below:

- (1.) Using the phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.
- (2.) From the verbatim transcript of your experience complete the following steps: (a.) Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience. (b.) Record all relevant statements. (c.) List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the *invariant horizons* or meaning units of the experience. (d.) Relate

and cluster the invariant meaning units into *themes*. (e.) Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples. (f.) Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of your experience. (g.) Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience.

(3.) From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the co-researchers, complete the above steps, a through g.

(4.) From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122)

I followed each of the steps above to analyze all interview data. Dedoose, a computer assisted qualitative analysis software, assisted with the management, organization, and coding of the data for this empirical phenomenological research. Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, and I manually performed line-by-line readings and analysis of the text. Whereby, I identified the following invariant horizons (Moustakas, 1994): leadership in the home, leadership in the community, and leadership in the school. Moreover, Table 2 reveals the emerging themes of each invariant horizon.

Table 2

*Invariant Horizons and Themes*

Invariant Horizons	Themes
Leadership in the Home	presence and strong influence of father, loving and caring mother, partnership between father and mother, grandmother as pillar in the family, older influential sibling, supportive aunt and/or uncle, faith modeled in the home, close-knit family
Leadership in the Community	Mentorship access, local church engagement, community center access, community service opportunities, work opportunities, after school programs, involvement in summer camps, involvement in internships, school leaders involved in the community, involvement in sports programs, exposure to community change agents
Leadership in the School	parents and educators as partners, leadership opportunities for students in the classroom, strong student/teacher (professor) relationships, strong principal (university president) leadership, effective administrative team, college visits in high school, involved counselor, culture of high expectations, extra-curricular involvement, impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), internship opportunities

***Composite character profiles.*** In order to more concisely present the lived experiences of the six men as stories, I made the decision to create composite characters. The concept of composite characters has been utilized in educational research (Taylor & Wallace, 2007, p. 85).

The results of my phenomenological research are presented as narrative portraits. The creation of each story or character was based on the empirical data from the phenomenological interviews. After careful analysis of each participant, I made the decision to craft a total of two composite characters. Table 3 reveals the merging of two sets of participant's phenomenological interviews. William and Grant's lived experiences were similar in background thus providing an opportunity to merge the two experiences into one composite character. Likewise, Joshua and Albert shared similar lived experiences allowing me the opportunity to synthesize their stories into one narrative. Danny and Kingston's lived experiences were distinctively different from each other's and the other four participants. Hence, I decided against merging their lived experience into one composite character. Therefore, their stories reflect only their individual lived experiences.

Table 3  
*Composite Character Creations*

Composite Character	Participant 1	Participant 2 (if applicable)
William Grant (age 37)	William (age 36)	Grant (age 37)
Joshua Albert (age 39)	Joshua (age 41)	Albert (age 36)

**Kingston.** Kingston's narrative portrayal represents his lived experiences. His character has been crafted utilizing one hour and 32 minutes of interview data, 110 interview excerpts exported from Dedoose, and 26 single-spaced pages of interview transcription data. Kingston is a 30-year-old African American male. He grew up in a tiny rural community. He was raised by his grandmother during his formative years and then moved to the suburbs to live with his aunt. He completed a year and a half at a technical college and currently works at the post office.

**Danny.** Danny's composite character was also constructed from his lived experiences alone. Danny's character was designed after two hours and nine minutes of interviews, etched

from 111 excerpts from Dedoose, and 29 single-spaced pages of interview transcription data.

Danny is a 33-year-old African American male who grew up in a small rural town. He grew up in a home with his father and mother, a married couple, who introduced him to the Lord at a very young age. He attended and graduated from high school and continued his education at a HBCU. Danny matriculated further and completed his doctorate degree in engineering from a top research university.

***William Grant.*** William Grant's composite character was crafted from two participant's lived experiences that shared similar experiences growing up and a career dedicated to sports and fitness. His character was designed after three hours and fifty-six minutes of interviews, etched from 229 excerpts from Dedoose, and 61 single-spaced pages of interview transcription data. William Grant is a 37-year-old African American male who grew up poor in an affluent suburb in a northeastern state. He grew up in a home with his father and mother, until they divorced when he was seven years old. He attended and graduated from high school and continued his education at a HBCU. William Grant played professional football. After retiring from professional football, he returned to his Alma mater to complete his degree in Physical Education, and he currently works at a private Christian school as a high school football coach.

***Joshua Albert.*** Joshua Albert's composite character was also established from two participant's lived experiences that shared similar experiences and who now have careers in executive level positions as educational leaders in public education. His character was designed after four hours and fifty-seven minutes of interviews, etched from 325 excerpts from Dedoose, and 69 single-spaced pages of interview transcription data. Joshua Albert is a 39-year-old African American male who grew up in poverty in a tiny rural town in a southeastern state. He grew up in a home with his grandmother, mother, and aunt. His father lived close by and saw him regular-

ly. He attended and graduated from high school and continued his education at a HBCU. Joshua Albert currently serves as an educational leader in a public setting; his daily decisions impact student achievement and life outcomes.

*Crystallization.* “The illumination emanating from the crystal represents a much clearer, brighter, and authentic portraiture of the participants and the collected data” (Cugno & Thomas, 2009, p. 114). Just as a crystal is multi-faceted, crystallization positions the researcher to examine the data from many angles revealing a brilliance all its own. Ellingson (2009) portrayed crystallization as the combination of:

multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (p. 4)

Hence, crystallization is positioned within a constructivist epistemological assumption as knowledge is constructed after viewing the data from multiple angles. In essence, the multi-facet angles of a crystal mirror the multi-dimensional way of knowing.

I was afforded the opportunity to perceive, know, and envision an additional angle through the influential leader interviews. The interviews with the four leaders provided a fresh, new perspective into the lives of the six men who evaded the school to prison pipeline. As I sat and gleaned from the wisdom of these older men, I heard consistent recollections of stories that mirrored the reflections shared by the man who referred them to me. I was amazed to see that all the influential leaders identified were men. I interviewed two fathers, one college football coach who served as a mentor, and one high school principal. William and Albert recommended that I

interview their coach and principal; however, both of their fathers have passed away. William assured me that if his father were still alive, he would want me to interview his father. As I interviewed Albert and watched him hold back tears as I asked him to share about the impact of his father's life on his life, I sensed that if his father were still living, I would have had the pleasure of being introduced to his father as well. The portraits, stories, and recollections provide another way of knowing the lived experiences of the six men. The richness of all accounts allowed the magnificent portrayal of a "much clearer, brighter, and authentic portraiture of the participants and the collected data" (Cugno & Thomas, 2009, p. 114).

## Results

The narrative portraits in this section provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of six men of color, shared through the lens of four narratives: Kingston, Danny, William Grant, and Joshua Albert, who evaded the school to prison pipeline. These narrative portrayals detail: *What roles do the leadership in the home, community, and the school play in the men's successful navigation of the educational system and beyond?*

### Leadership Lens: Context of Home

**Kingston (30 years old).** Kingston's elementary school days were filled with mischief. He was raised by and lived with his grandmother, the matriarch of the family, for the first 12 years of his life. Granny cared for Kingston, his cousin, and his great-grandmother. Kingston described his grandmother as strict and loving. He was 6 months younger than his cousin, Solomon. Kingston treasured the fact that he and Solomon grew up like *brothers*. They shared a room and an inseparable bond. Granny tried her best to keep the reins on her two grandsons; however, they got into a lot of trouble at school. Kingston admitted, "We went wild because there was no male influence in our lives!"

He felt comfortable in Granny's home. When asked about his responsibilities at home he responded, "It wasn't more so that we had responsibilities, it was that she helped us with our manners." She taught Kingston and Solomon discipline and instilled a reverence and respect for elders and those in authority. Granny made sure their basic needs were met.

At the age of 12, he moved in with his mother. It was a tumultuous time. Kingston declared, "I hated that environment!" He was separated from all resemblance of normalcy that he previously called home with Granny. The pain of describing the year he lived with Mom was evident as he and I dialogued, so much so that I stopped asking questions as the tension mounted in the room. Child Protective Services removed him and his three sisters from the care of their mother, and he returned for a brief period to live with his grandmother. By the conclusion of our last interview, Kingston has not looked upon the face of his father.

With Granny's permission, Kingston transitioned to a growing, flourishing suburb to live with his Aunt Brenda. Simultaneously while he was moving in with his Aunt Brenda, Solomon was moving approximately 20 miles away from him to stay with his mother, Kingston's other aunt. The *brothers* were delighted that they would still be in close proximity of each other. He described his transition as wonderful. "It was different and wonderful all at the same time!" His Aunt helped him to open up. A new world of opportunity unfolded before his very eyes when he transitioned from a small rural town to the booming suburb, nestled on the outskirts of a thriving urban metropolis.

Eventually, his three younger sisters moved in with him and Aunt Brenda; they lived in the same household for four years during his high school career. He didn't recall any family traditions or vacations. He attributed this to, "The memories that I had were kinda fuzzy; you know what I mean? So there's nothing that really sticks out." His experience wasn't accentuated with

summer trips and family vacations. Yet with sincere appreciation in his heart he recalled, “My aunt worked hard. We were okay. The lights were never turned off. The power was never off where I lived at, so.”

Aunt Brenda provided structure for Kingston. He kept a clean room, washed and folded his own laundry, and cut and groomed his hair. She refused to take him to the barbershop. She ensured that he found a job, and he was responsible for purchasing his own personal products, toiletries, shoes and clothes. He remained under Aunt Brenda’s care until he graduated from high school.

At the time of our interview Kingston is 30 years old. Kingston described the impact of his grandmother’s leadership on his life. Granny focused on discipline and manners. She ensured that his basic needs were taken care of and teaching him how to survive in a world where the public eye can be unforgiving for a Black male. She was old school, very old school, and she wanted both Kingston and Solomon to represent her well.

When comparing Granny and Aunt Brenda, he portrayed Aunt Brenda as a bit more relaxed. She emphasized the importance of good manners, how to represent her well in public, and how to speak to adults with respect. She wasn’t strict like Granny, but she indeed instilled structure and successful habits for survival. Aunt Brenda released freedom bit by bit as Kingston matured. She set the wheels in motion for him to be able to make wise decisions on his own. His aunt put a framework in place for a gradual release of decision making, affording him the opportunity to be more responsible. She advised, “This is what you need to do. This is how you run a household. This is what you do with your money.” The wisdom gleaned from Aunt Brenda he carries to this day. He reflected, “So those things I still carry with me, the very basic fundamental things. They’re small, but they’re very important.”

**Danny (33 years old).** His parents described the brother closest to him as “Oops” and him as “Double Oops!” Danny is the youngest of five children; he has one sister, the senior child, and three brothers. Both his father and mother raised him. Danny shared that his parents were always mistaken as his grandparents. His dad was 42, and his mom was 37 when he was born. When Danny was born, his father announced to the church that the Lord gave him a son in his old age.

When he was born, the brother closest to him was eleven years older than him. All of his other siblings were pretty grown. His parents valued the importance of connecting with family, and Danny experienced much travel as the family would hit the road in his dad’s van to visit the other siblings, whether in military or in college. He described his family as close-knit. He remembered the days of his older siblings always coming home for the holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and other times sporadically throughout the year.

At the time of our interview Danny is 33 years old, married, and a father of a four-year-old daughter. One of Danny’s goals in life is to be as half as good of a father to his daughter as his father was to him. With a mix of both reverence and excitement in his voice, he proudly shared that his parents just celebrated 53 years of holy matrimony. He detailed how his parents did a good job of raising him and added that he enjoyed the friendship of both parents. However, he made it clear that their goal wasn’t to be a friend; their first goal was to be a parent.

His parents pointed him to Christ; Danny was raised in the church. His father served as chair of the deacon board, and his mom sang in the choir. Danny played the piano and used his gift from the Lord to serve the people of God. At the young tender age of seven, he started playing the piano in the church. He detailed that his life was centered around his relationship with God and the work of the ministry. The responsibility of serving as a musician for the church at a

young age helped him to be disciplined. For example, he knew that an abundant amount of homework would not prevent his parents from leading him to Bible Study every Wednesday evening. Hence, a compact schedule provided Danny with the structure needed to soar. His foundation for success was being laid.

Danny's father encouraged him to seek excellence in his work at home, in the community, and in school. Danny recalled an instance where he made a 98 on a test. His mother greeted him with, "Good job dear!" However, his father challenged him with, "What happened to those two points boy?" He learned not to settle. Some may consider this overbearing, but not Danny. He recounted that his father was never negative or domineering, just always encouraging his children to seek for better. When I asked if he felt any pressures at home, he assured me that he did not. Danny lovingly described that his parents had a unique way of enforcing what they desired and envisioned for their children. His parents delicately kept a balance with just enough tension to push but not discourage. Danny never felt like a failure in their eyes despite any shortcomings. They had a beautiful way of encouraging him and allowing his vision and dreams to soar. Danny hopes that he will be just as successful at striking this picturesque balance of love and structure for his daughter.

His responsibilities at home included washing dishes and cutting the grass. He shared that Dad made sure the boys were good outside, and Mom ensured that the boys were good inside, too. From changing a tire and oil, to cooking banana pudding, to putting together furniture, to vacuuming, Dad and Mom worked as a team to ensure that his (and his siblings) skills were diversified for the road ahead.

Danny's siblings also played an integral role in his growth and development. He grew up closest to his brother, Michael, who was 11 years older than him. Michael exercised his respon-

sibility as the older brother very well. He watched over Danny with great care when Dad and Mom were out and about or on the road traveling. He recalled the days of playing cards and Ninja Turtles with his older brother; their bond was solid. One of his saddest days was when Michael graduated from high school. Danny knew that this milestone for his brother signaled a transition, Michael's transition from high school to the Navy. Danny treasured the times his brother came home after departing for the Navy. Those precious times were filled with love and memories of his brother taking him to the movies and allowing him to just hang out with him despite their age difference. To help with Michael's transition to the Navy, the oldest sibling and Danny's only sister bought him a Whippet Greyhound. However, the dog was stolen from home within the first three days. The family didn't realize the value of the greyhound at the time; Danny just saw a puppy to cling to.

Danny's father and mother created endearing traditions around the Christmas holiday that have deepened over the years. Danny recalled the family tradition of going each year with his father to the Christmas tree farm to select and cut down a live tree. His siblings would always come home each year for Christmas regardless of where their paths led them over the course of the year. One of Danny's dreams was to one day be able to host his family for Christmas as a grown man under his own roof. He was delighted to share with me that Christmas 2015 his dream came to fruition as he had purchased a home large enough to house his entire family.

Danny was shocked to find out in high school that he grew up in poverty. Slightly joking, he shared that his parents never informed him that he was poor. Their love was so strong that he never felt he was missing anything. Danny recalled seeing his parents sacrifice the choicest piece of meat at the dinner table by going without. Dad and Mom would enjoy a vegetable only plate allowing the children the nourishment of succulent pork chops. Danny was secure knowing that

all of his needs were met. He didn't have expensive accouterments, but he was assured that his basic needs would be provided for.

His mother had aspirations of becoming a French teacher. However, once she got pregnant at the age of 18, she abandoned her dream and elected to be a homemaker, and what a loving home she made. In addition to teaching during the day, his father worked in the evenings and on Saturdays at a mechanic shop that he co-owned with Danny's uncle.

Danny described his father as the leader in his home growing up. He was a godly example of a loving husband and father. He portrayed his mother as the close second leader in the home. His parents complemented each other beautifully. Danny's father led by being a servant, both in the home and outside of the home. Danny made it clear that it wasn't an iron fist ruling; it was not a dictatorship. It was more of an earned leadership. Dad was a steady in the home; Danny never doubted that his dad would not be there.

Another tradition, affording him the opportunity to bond with his father, was fishing. Danny's father would take him night fishing with his uncle and their friends in search of crappie. He recalled a fishing trip where there were a total of five males on the boat when only four would comfortably fit. Danny's uncle and a friend took the front of the boat while Danny and another one of his uncle's friend's took the back of the boat. Dad took the middle, the least favorite spot standing all night while the rest sat and enjoyed fishing the night. In Danny's words, this was Dad's way of teaching humility. He was able to witness first hand on many accounts his father putting others needs above his own. Seeing such humility demonstrated his true walk with Christ.

Danny described the impact of his dad's leadership on his life as profound. Dad and Mom modeled seamless teamwork. Their mutual respect and love, the epitome of love, was evident to

Danny. Both parents were strong in the Lord and strong in their faith, and Danny is on the path to follow his father's lead.

***Influential leader interview with Father.*** I was afforded the opportunity to interview Danny's father. At the tender age of 75, his father lovingly described his youngest child as "a blessing from the time he was born." He shared in detail the importance of modeling his faith and trust in God before his son. He admitted that in his son's maturing process, "He has a strong reverence to God. We taught him. We pointed the way. We took him to church all of the time, and he learned the power of God and importance of a relationship with the Almighty." His father admired Danny's ability to relate and connect to people. He recognized the fact that his gifts made room for him to interact with adults at a very young age as a church musician. Dad reflected, "He started mesmerizing us as a young fellow with his ability to do music."

As I talked with his father, the depth of their bond as father and son was evident. Upon his arrival, following the successful legacy of four older siblings, educators at the high school were delighted by Danny's presence. Dad detailed, "By the time Danny got there, he went in with his own little magnetic personality, and he warmed the people. He was always helpful with the principal and the counselor, the administrative heads. He would somehow make friends with them." His ability to relate well with adults as a teenager remained a strength.

Furthermore, his father was so proud to share that Danny made the decision to stay home to complete his undergrad degree, whereas his other children went away to college. Dad shared that after college, Danny's experiences continued to carry him to unique places and provide amazingly, fresh, rich experiences. Dad concluded our time together on the phone portraying his son in the following light: "He's a *beautiful companion*. I have gone to places that I never

would've gone without my *baby boy*. He really fills in his spot." To hear a grown man call his grown son a beautiful companion and his baby boy is simply beautiful!

**William Grant (37 years old).** William Grant was the youngest of five children; he was his father's only son. He was nurtured and raised by a loving mother and a supportive father. His father had five children and his mother had two. His father's oldest child, William Grant's eldest sister, was in and out of prison for petty theft and identity theft.

At the age of seven, the structure of his home changed when his parents divorced; yet, his father remained present in his life even though he was absent from the home. He and his father were inseparable; their bond was unbreakable. When his parents divorced he was heartbroken, yet he reflected, "My father left our home, but he never left me!" His father eventually remarried before he entered high school, and he had a respectable relationship with his stepmother.

He and Rachel, an older sister, grew up in the same home together. He and Rachel had a solid relationship. Their bond has deepened and strengthened over the years. The two of them shared the responsibility of stewarding chores around the home. William Grant recalled, "You had to complete your chores: dishwashing, cleaning your room, vacuuming, things of that magnitude. If you didn't complete your chores, you weren't able to do what you wanted to do. Homework, also, had to be done before you were able to do anything else." For the most part, he felt comfortable at home. He detailed, "You know, sometimes these days, you hear people using the pressures of 'Dad wasn't there!' But I didn't necessarily use that because at the end of the day, he was still present."

I asked William Grant to share what he valued the most as an elementary aged student. He looked me square in the eyes and replied, "My relationship with my dad. It was because he meant so much to me. He did so much for others." He recounted how his father showed him the

different values of life, the things that he needed to do, and the things that he needed to leave alone or walk away from. At the time of our interview, William Grant is 37 years old, and his father has since passed. In a moment of reflection, where all seemed to silence itself as we sat in his office nestled in the corner of the gymnasium as students were outside playing volleyball, he shared how he understood now, more so, what his father was teaching him. At the end of the day, he didn't value a whole lot of material things. His father taught him not to value those things. He truly valued the relationship that he had with his dad despite the divorce. Reflecting he shared, "At the end of the day when you look back at it, you know, he was wrong. He was dead wrong for what he was doing and what he did to Mom. It happens. They were grown; *I* had nothing to do with it. But I still yearned for that relationship with him because he was my dad. That relationship in itself was what I valued the most at that point in time."

When I asked William Grant to share the person who influenced him the most as a middle school aged child, he identified, "Momma! She was my comfort. She was that sounding board for anything." He then clarified, "She was more so support than influence." And what a brave and secure mother she proved to be. When William Grant reached the ninth grade, he moved in with his father and stepmother. Even though Mom desired to have her son at home with her, she sacrificed what she wanted for the benefit of her son. She knew at this stage in his journey, he needed to be with his dad.

Uncle Charles, his dad's oldest brother, was a part of the fabric of William Grant's support system. He was a voice of encouragement. His two children, Chelsea and Charles, Jr., grew up with William Grant; they all attended the same elementary school. Their paths detoured at middle school, and then they were reunited as classmates in high school. The cousins fellowshiped with each other on a daily basis after school at Grandma's house. Every Friday, he was

afforded the opportunity to play after school at the local community center. He described his grandmother as, “the pillar of it all, to be honest with you. Although we had our parents, Grandma was really the one that instilled so much in us as youth. Cause it wasn’t a day that we weren’t able to see her. *Everything* went through Grandma, to be honest with you!”

He grew up in a close-knit family. He recalled the family celebration of Easter at Granny’s house with all of his siblings, parents, uncles, aunts, and a multitude of cousins who lived nearby. Easter was the biggest family tradition complete with the Annual Easter Egg Hunt. He reflected, “If you missed Easter that was almost like missing a World Championship or something! You know what I mean?” The family’s Annual Easter Egg Hunt was one tradition they all took pride in. The greatest joy was the excitement of the day, knowing they would have the opportunity to see everyone and celebrate the love of family.

William Grant described his dad’s impact on his life as tremendous! Trying to hold back tears he shared, “I find myself doing some of the same things he did. Some of the same things he would say to me, I find myself saying to kids I coach. So, his impact on me as a young man and growing up into a man is . . . I don’t even think it’s measurable because he had such an impact on me, and the things I do, to this day.” As he shared, I felt the weight of his impact on his son; I could see it in him as his eyes swelled with tears.

Finally, I asked him to describe the impact of his mom’s leadership on his life. He narrated, “Mom taught me how to forgive. Actually, she *showed* me how to forgive.” The revelation of that truth hit me in the very moment the words parted from his lips. He continued, “It was a lot of stuff my dad did to her, but despite it all, she chose to forgive him.” She taught him how to have unwavering, unconditional love for people. He described how she exuded tough love with a soft touch.

**Joshua Albert (39 years old).** When he was born, the doctors didn't think he was going to make it out of the hospital, but he proved them all wrong. Three days after his birth, the doctor brought him to his mother and said, "He's going to be okay. He's a fighter!" Mom was 19 when she gave birth to her only son. Joshua Albert's father was much older than his mother. His parents never married. Joshua Albert's dad chose to legitimize his son, his only son, at the age of three.

He grew up in the house with his mother, aunt, grandmother, and older sister. He is 39 years old at the time of our interview, and with a heart of gratitude he shared, "All of them are still alive today." Joshua Albert's mother was selfless. Mom worked for a textile company that ultimately got outsourced to Mexico. Afterwards, she bounced from job to job, mainly cafeteria style and custodial work. He described his mother as extremely docile and very gentle. Granny, born in 1932, pretty much raised him and his older sister, Tonya.

Growing up, the children heard no profanity in the home. No alcohol was consumed in the house. The adult women were not overly spiritual, but they went to church regularly. They were always respectful and mindful of him. They were mindful of the fact that he was the only male in the home. He never saw anything from them, as far as their personal hygiene was concerned, that made him feel uncomfortable. He recounted, "It was always classy; it was respectful!" They didn't run men through their home. They didn't have a lot of outside friends; they were each other's friends.

However, he argued that, "They may have been too nurturing. I didn't learn how to take care of a home, such as ironing clothes, sweeping, mopping, taking out the trash, and making up a bed until I got to college." Granny always had a full breakfast prepared for him and Tonya.

When he and Tonya arrived home from school, they completed their homework, watched their cartoons, played outside, and had dinner. Granny prepared a feast for dinner every day.

Dad was a part of his life even though he was not physically present in the home. He admitted, “Dad was a stabilizing force. He made a decision he was going to be a part of my life. He was gonna be honorable and respectful. He was gonna take care of me, and he was gonna respect my mother, too.” Joshua Albert’s dad married, divorced, and was later remarried. He admitted, “I would laugh about him trying to discipline me from afar. But honestly, I’m glad and grateful that he was always there for me.” He remembered seeing his dad at least once a week.

He was exposed to many things. He proudly shared a few bonding moments that he enjoyed with Dad. His father was an equestrian; so, he would take him around on horses and share his love of horses with his son. His father also had a love for motorcycles and consequently taught him how to ride. He reflected, “I think I’m a lot like my father in many ways. Like I speak up, and I’m resolute in how I feel about things. He made me push myself to lead and to be excellent!”

Joshua Albert and Tonya were five years apart in age, and they enjoyed a lot of time together. They were trained to complete all of their chores and responsibilities around the house on Saturdays. Their bond deepened when she went away to college. He was in middle school when Tonya ventured away to an HBCU along the eastern coast. He surmised, “Going to college for my sister and I was an unspoken expectation. Like I didn’t even know what a first generation college student was until about ten years ago. My parents were high school graduates. I don’t even think that I knew that they didn’t go to college until I was filling out my Free Application for Federal Student Aid.” Tonya also helped him navigate uncharted waters. She helped make tangible what was once just a dream. Finally, he recalled, “I worked with all diligence to get

scholarships, too. I knew that my Mom, Granny, and Auntie were in no financial position to outright pay for college for us.”

Granny, Mom, and Auntie did not allow him and Tonya to walk the streets. They were in a controlled, protected environment. It seemed as if everyone in his small community was related in one way or another. He officially met his best friend and third cousin, Samuel, when he they were both in the second grade. Joshua Albert recalled growing up with just three television channels in the home. He remembered going to school and everyone knowing the latest music except for him and Samuel. This was in the early 1980s when Sugar Hill Gang dropped the hit Rapper’s Delight. By the time they were in the fourth grade, Hip-Hop music was up and coming. He recalled sitting in the car from time to time and hearing the uncensored lyrics of rap music. He and Samuel recalled their peers talking about this music and wondering what all the fuss was about. He admitted, “I was clueless because I was not in the streets to hear it.” This was the time gang violence across the nation was on the rise. He recalled that drugs, more specifically, crack cocaine were seeping into the larger neighboring Black communities. He recalled, “So everything that we were hearing, where I was from, it was pretty much yesterday’s news by the time it got to us. In that time period, for where we were positioned, that was the big thing. In order to be popular, you had to be into drugs or you had to be into this whole negative culture. But my mom shielded me from all of that! And so I did not grow up directly exposed to the ills of society.”

Joshua Albert recalled a time when he was 15 or 16, and he was learning how to drive. Mom still didn’t allow him to just run the streets. He shared, “And of course at that age you’re feeling yourself. You feel that you’re able to take on the world! I mean I could walk; I could talk. I could feed myself; I could go to the bathroom by myself. You know, I could do things by my-

self. But I was not allowed to be out in the world. And there *was* a reason behind it. So I grew up with a very, very tight, small group. And it was controlled. It was all controlled.”

Granny had a high school education coupled with a “steel trap memory.” Joshua Albert summarized, “I think I inherited her ability to recall and recount details. Her memory was impeccable.” When Tonya would ask Granny, “Granny, where’s the toothbrush?” With precision she replied, “Go check the in the third drawer to the left.” He further detailed, “She knew where everything was in the house. This is just *one* of the reasons I respected her so because she always had *the* answer.” To date, he admires and respects her mental acumen.

He continued to share about how he was amazed by her physical strength and spiritual strength. When he started driving he inherited a little fender bender, and she popped the fender bender back in place with her bare hands! Granny told him, “Don’t worry about it!” He declared, “The woman is *still* amazing!” He portrayed her as a stabilizing force. She was a homemaker. She didn’t yell, cuss, or fuss to get her point across. Granny helped him develop his spiritual base. He shared, “At night, it’d be late at night, she’d just be praying and praying and singing. And she always was singing spiritual songs throughout the day, but she’d just be praying all the time. And I later learned that she was just praying for us all the time! And so I take that with me because I think about the things that I’ve experienced and the bullets I’ve dodged. What should have been the end, but it wasn’t the end!” He was so grateful for the effectual, fervent prayers of a righteous grandmother.

Tonya’s leadership in his life also had an amazing impact on his life. Laughing he shared, “I just thank God that she came before me, and she paved the way and learned so many things and made so many mistakes, so that I wouldn’t have to.” Her leadership in his life supplemented the things Mom, Dad, Granny, and Auntie did.

*Influential leader interview with Father.* I had the pleasure of interviewing Joshua Albert's father. Our interview commenced as he shared, "I passed along to him what my father passed along to me that he should always be a provider for his family." He admitted that Joshua Albert was maturing into the man he hoped he would become. His father articulated the following point that he constantly repeated to each of his children, "Anything that you are a part of, a club or activity, I expect you to lead. There is one of three positions you can take. You either need to be the president, secretary, or treasurer." The expectation was that his son would always assume a leadership position. It was evident from Joshua Albert that he internalized this expectation of his father, as he made it a point to always assume a leadership position.

His father provided more insight into Joshua Albert's upbringing in the home. "He had his mother, and he had me. I have to say this. His mother and I weren't married, but I still played a very active role in his upbringing." Mom and Dad had a partnership. He recalled telling Joshua Albert, "When you go to school, you don't have anything to worry about. You're number one job is to be a great student! We aren't sending you up there to joke around or be the class clown." Not only did Joshua Albert heed the direction of his father, he went to college with a full scholarship. He was a disciplined child and obedient to the direction of both of his parents.

### **Leadership Lens: Context of Community**

**Kingston (30 years old).** Kingston had the opportunity to grow up in two cities. Granny raised him and Solomon in a small rural community in a Southeastern state with a population just under 6,000. He described the town as being very, very small. He grew up as a Jehovah's Witness and recalled waiting outside Wal-Mart on Sundays after the meeting for them to open the store. The large majority of residents went to church on Sundays, the town shut down all operations until residents finished their Sunday worship services. His community was home to a kao-

lin mine where chalk was manufactured. On Friday nights, the entire community gathered to support the town's football game. He etched a picture in my mind as he described how he and Solomon played football on the dirt road with dust flying in the air on a hot summer day. This is the same dirt road that was just paved within the past two years.

His town was small and safe, a place where community and family mattered. Kingston enjoyed the fact that everyone knew everybody; he considered this a benefit. When I questioned if there were any risks to his small community he shared, "It was a tiny town so you put a cap on yourself by living there. I would see people leave to move to the big city, but they'd be back in three months because they couldn't adjust. It was a different type of living. It required a different type of approach to survive in the big city than it did in our rural town. They couldn't hang!"

The paved roads and big houses were an interesting change of pace when Kingston moved to the suburbs to live with Aunt Brenda. Laughing, he recalled how moving to the suburbs proved to be a culture shock for him. He was baffled at how people in the same state lived so differently; the contrast was like night and day. People talked differently; the language was different. It was bigger and quickly expanding. Kingston purposed, "As I grew, the town grew, too!" It was my small, rural town on a very large scale. Furthermore, he learned the gift of communicating with, interacting with, and appreciating many diverse cultures.

In middle school, he participated in a summer camp at a local HBCU two summers in a row. It was a full day program that focused on sports and exposing young men to a college campus. This was the only summer camp he attended as a participant. He enjoyed the exposure to the campus coupled with meeting students from around the metropolitan area.

Aunt Brenda worked diligently to ensure that Kingston had opportunities to work within the community as a teenager in order to foster responsibility and structure. His first job as a teen-

ager was working at a summer camp where he learned different trades. After this experience, he found his way to the kitchen of a local restaurant where he washed dishes. The power of community was evident; his neighbor shared about a Camp Counselor opportunity with Aunt Brenda. She took Kingston to submit his application, and he was hired for the position. Camp Courageous for children ages five to 12 provided academic instruction, arts and crafts, and sports. This experience proved to be his favorite summer job, and he sharpened his skill set each summer. He flourished in this role for three bountiful summers.

At the age of 16, Kingston ventured onto the paved streets as a driver. Thankfully, he was armed with respect for his elders and people in positions of authority. These tools proved to be of necessity for prying him out of the traps set by the mere fact that he is a Black male in the United States of America. He divulged the fact that he is pulled over by the police approximately eight to ten times each year; this badgering commenced for him at the impressionable age of 16. He recalled a traffic stop where the police officer told him that he fit the profile of Black man who was walking around a mall plaza all day. He waited 15 minutes for his license and registration to show a clear before being released by the officer. He recounted that he is always cordial. He purposed that his job in these frequent stops is to get home alive. So he always responds, “Yes, officer; No, officer,” regardless of how ridiculous the cause for the stop may be. He admitted, “I know that my demeanor can control the situation or take the situation out of control; so, I comply.”

Kingston ascribed the role of leadership in the community to the farmers and mechanics in the tiny rural town where Granny raised him. He shared that these men were heads of their households. They saw the sunrise and worked after the sun set. These community leaders had the ability to bring their children to work with them, and they create a legacy of hard work, endur-

ance, and responsibility for their children. Kingston kept an eye on these men as they led their community but had even more respect for how they led their families. He observed that most families in the community had an involved Dad in the picture.

He revered coaches from his high school, local church pastors, and volunteers from the local church in the suburbs where he matured under the careful watch and guidance of Aunt Brenda. So ultimately, he valued their ability to lend their voice for the good of youth. The coaches had the ability to deal with students from grades 6-12. The churches in his local community were actively engaged in community outreach. Kingston grew up as a Jehovah's Witness; hence, his interaction with churches prior to moving in with Aunt Brenda was non-existent. The churches set the tone for the community. They provided a food bank for families in need, counseling services for families, and an Annual Back to School Rally. In Kingston's eyes, many of the community needs were addressed through the church.

**Danny (33 years old).** Danny grew up in a small rural town with a population of approximately 70,000 residents. This community was predominantly Black, comprised of four major high schools and a few private ones. His family grew up on the East side of town behind a small manufacturing plant, behind the mill. The children in the community played outside until the streetlights came on. When the streetlights came on, Danny would be back in the house or in his backyard.

Danny attended the HBCU in his small town. When I asked him to describe the benefits of growing up in his community, he accounted for his exposure and closeness to a HBCU, which he later attended after high school graduation. These formative years at the HBCU successfully prepared him to further his education earning his doctorate in engineering.

Danny was able to serve his community in the church as a musician, his first job, and working for Dad doing odd jobs at his garage on Saturdays. He started as the church musician for the Youth Choir at age 7. By age 14, he started playing for the Senior Choir at his home church, coupled with a Senior Choir appointment at another church in the community; hence, he was interacting with adults regularly. He was away from his father and mother while simultaneously learning how to establish himself as a leader in the company of his elders. Danny's responsibilities at church helped to mature him and seasoned his walk with wisdom at a young age.

His father worked diligently to include Danny in the routine tasks at the garage to sharpen the ability of his son to work skillfully with his hands. Dad afforded Danny the opportunity to help with oil changes and light bulb changes. Danny proudly admits that his handiness comes from his father. He affectionately recalled that his father had a gift for making him feel special. Danny's job may have been to hold the flashlight just right. If Danny didn't hold that flashlight just right, Dad insisted that the job wouldn't have been completed without Danny's help.

Danny had his own money at an early age. He recalled one instance where he paid for his dad's gasoline. He was 12 years old, and the cashier said, "Boy, what'd you do? Rob a bank or something?" His dad quickly took offense responding, "No, he works. He plays at the church and does this and that." He learned early that the appearance of money in his young Black hands might arouse suspicion in the heart of an older White male based on the color of his skin.

Danny shared yet another instance, 18 years after the aforementioned incident at the gas station, where it appeared that he was targeted because of the color of his skin, but this time the targeted attack came in the still of the night while he was driving home. It was slightly after midnight, and Danny was headed home from the airport after attending a weeklong conference in Reno, Nevada. His only sister suggested that he spend the night due to the lateness of the hour;

yet, Danny wanted to rest in his own bed after being away from home for a week. He was in his truck, accented with rims and the added touch of green lights illuminating from underneath. Red and blue lights on non-emergency vehicles are illegal but not green lights. Danny knew the article number by heart that detailed this fact. Driving with a pounding headache in the still of the night, he recalled pulling up to a stoplight. He came at a halt next to a police Cruiser; the police didn't say anything. Immediately after pulling off from the traffic light, an unmarked police SUV came out of nowhere, pulled up behind him with flashing lights directing him to pull over. Then, the Cruiser that had been beside him turned its flashing lights on and moved in front of him. Two police officers approached his car and asked, "Can I see your license and registration?" Danny complied. One officer questioned, "Where are you heading this time of night?" He replied, "Well, I'm actually heading home." The officer probed, "Heading home? Where are you coming from?" Danny shared, "leaving the airport, flew out to Reno, Nevada for a conference. I was going to stay at my sister's house, but I just wanted to be home in my bed tonight. So I'm driving home."

The officers disappeared with his license and registration; Danny waited for what seemed like an eternity, as his headache became more excruciating. He recalled that 7 minutes felt like forever. He knew he wasn't speeding, and the officer never told him why he was pulled over. The two officers returned to the car with his papers. One stated, "Well, . . . we're gonna let you go, these green lights though . . . these green lights under your car are illegal." Danny responded, "I had these professionally installed at an auto trim shop. I checked for sure that the illegal colors were red and blue, but green is okay." He retaliated, "No, they're illegal. You need to get them removed. I can follow you somewhere or you can just say you're gonna get 'em taken off." To

which Danny replied, “Okay. I’ll get ‘em taken off.” After receiving the desired response from Danny, the officers let him go.

Danny’s goal was to get home safely, not to argue with the officers. He knew that the green lights were legal. As a follow up, he asked a police lieutenant from his church if the article changed for the legal color of lights under cars. The lieutenant replied, “No, green is still alright.” He sought out other community leaders in his local church body who could provide proper guidance on the legality of the stop. He reported that deputies, lieutenants and law enforcement personnel were members of his local church. Danny shared that he was out late, and his vehicle fit a profile. Not only did his vehicle fit a profile, his skin fit a profile. Through it all, he was grateful and thankful to God that he made it home that evening.

Danny was blessed to build mentoring relationships with men in his church community. Since he was a church musician at such a young age, he was always close to his pastors. His godfather baptized him when he received Christ in his heart at the age of six. His godfather moved to pastor in a neighboring city, and Pastor Charles was installed as the new pastor. Danny remembered that this was Pastor Charles’ first pastorate and hence, very special to him. By this time, Danny was 13 or 14 years of age. Pastor Charles was young and had the youngest musician in the community; their parallels served as a bonding point. Residents of their hometown stared poverty in the face in this rural town as most braced the deadening heat of summer without central air conditioning. Danny recalled going door to door with Pastor Charles in the heat of the summer passing out boxed fans to residents of the community in need. Recounting the gratitude of residents receiving fans, Danny clearly remembered Pastor Charles’ sadness and disappointment that the church was not able to provide more for the community. Yes, the provision of box

fans was a first step, but in reality they were no defense for that 98-degree summer heat. Danny saw a love for serving others modeled before him.

The depth of this relationship was seen when Danny was ordained as a deacon in his church at the age of 32. Danny was convinced that Pastor Charles would not be able to leave his flock on a Sunday to share in the ordination service. He was delightfully surprised when he looked up and saw him in the audience cheering him on.

One of Danny's neighbors was a stand out community leader in his eyes. He affectionately described Mr. Beasley as "some of everything!" A retired Navy man, Mr. Beasley was well known by all in the community. He was a notary public, a man well known, with nerves of steel. Mr. Beasley protected the whole neighborhood, not just Danny's street. He knew everybody by name; therefore, any strangers were immediately confronted and challenged. Mr. Beasley was known for proclaiming, "bullets don't know nobody!" He believed in order and treating people right. Danny grew up seeing men guarding their communities on every front.

**William Grant (37 years old).** William Grant grew up in the projects of an affluent suburb 13 minutes North of a large major urban city in the northeast part of the United States. Just a mile up the road lived the wealthy, in large, prominent homes. The population of the city was approximately 60,000, and it served as a commercial hub. I inquired if he felt safe in his hometown. He reported, "For me I would say it was safe cause I knew everybody. So nothing really popped off while I was around. But as I got older and moved into high school, depending on the crowd that you was around, it could have went from safe, to unsafe, very quick."

He described diversity and access as two benefits of growing up in his hometown. William Grant found himself benefiting from the diversity all around him. His community was a mixing bowl of Asian, Black, Spanish, and White. He learned to communicate effectively and

appreciate and respect peers and adults from diverse cultures. Additionally, he had access. He detailed having access to a cross section of places to work and to shop. This access afforded him with several options for employment even as a teenager. The economy was healthy where he lived; his county was considered one of the richest places to live in the United States. Yet, there was such a stark contrast there between the *haves* and the *have-nots*.

Participating in sports was a part of the natural fabric of William Grant's makeup. Playing basketball in elementary and middle school and then football in high school proved to be a creative and necessary outlet for him. Participation in sports served as his primary after school activity in high school. He was a leader on the football field as he assumed the position of the team's quarterback. His coach pulled the best out of him. William Grant was able to flex his muscles of leadership and responsibility simultaneously through this outlet. His coaches had the ability to use his leadership skills and ability as leverage to influence other young men on his team.

He attended church regularly, every Sunday, with his father. His father's church was diverse, similar to the makeup of his community. A few times a year he would attend church with his mom. Mom's church was predominantly Black. Dad was very religious, and he was the constant example that William Grant compared himself to. He shared, "Everything was prayer; we prayed for everything. So I guess my foundation for staying out of trouble came from my faith and being around my dad." He was blessed to be under the care of both his Heavenly Father and his earthly father.

The reach of the mentoring program at the local community center impacted William Grant in multiple ways. The center was established for the purpose of providing a safe haven for urban youth. At the center, children could enter, sign in, play Ping-Pong, work out, play pool,

learn to resolve conflict with their peers, and participate in activities and any other program offerings. This home, away from home, kept children off the streets and out of trouble. Simultaneously it developed their ability to be team players and provided structures of accountability.

In middle school, William Grant participated in the mentoring program at the local community center. Different men in the community would lend their support serving as mentors. This program was structured whereby one man would mentor a group of boys in the community, meeting weekly, as there were not enough volunteers to have a one-on-one mentoring program. The boys in the program also had the opportunity to travel off site to ticketed events quarterly with their assigned mentors. In high school, the program transitioned to the high school campus. The mentors would actually visit their mentees at school. This provided an additional layer of accountability as mentors had immediate access to school personnel to inquire how their mentees were performing in school.

William Grant identified his coaches over the years, from elementary to high school, as leaders in the community. Additionally, his father served as a major contributor in the leadership of the community as well. Most of the coaches he encountered were men that he looked up to and respected in the community because of the dedication and the hours that they invested in the lives of the community and its youth.

**Joshua Albert (39 years old).** He grew up in poverty, but poverty was nowhere to be found in him. He was rich in spirit, in knowledge, and reared in a home filled with love and the peace of God. Joshua Albert was raised in a tiny rural town in a Southeastern state with a population of approximately 2,000 residents.

I asked him to share if he felt safe growing up in his hometown. His response pierced me as he shared the following exchange: “I think that answer comes in layers. I felt safe. It was a

safe place good place to grow up. I just wish *I* hadn't grown up there though.” The racial divide was always present. He remembered being in the band in high school, and they went to participate in a band competition at a top research university three hours away. Some White girls approached him and Samuel. They were flirting with them. They all knew that this was unacceptable in the eyes of society for different races to be involved like this. The girls were daring and pressed anyway. Joshua Albert admitted, “They wanted to get to know us.” Interestingly enough, the girls from his hometown came and took him and Samuel away from them. His hometown band buddies said, “These girls need to leave you alone because they know we don't do that where we come from.” He described it as the strangest thing. He felt, “It was like in their mind they were protecting us. They thought Samuel and I were their property, so to speak. *They* didn't want to engage with us, but we dare not let another White girl engage with us.” He shared this encounter to give me a glimpse into and help me better understand the racial climate of his community.

During the summer, he participated in an intramural sports camp at a local state college. Additionally, he was involved in his local church. Joshua Albert first met his high school principal as a young child at his church. Mr. Paulk was a Black male who also served as a deacon in his church. He and his family fellowshipped at this same church, and Mr. Paulk was afforded the opportunity to see Joshua Albert grow, develop, and mature prior to him stepping foot into his high school as a freshman. Church was also the place where the academic success of students in the congregation was celebrated. A culture of high expectations for academic performance was established. Subsequently, Joshua Albert purposed to develop the habits of a scholar with hopes that he would be called to the front of the church during grade reporting time to be celebrated by his church community.

He identified his pastor and a local councilwoman as leaders in the community. These two individuals were the standouts in his mind. His pastor was committed to the residents of the community, to their spiritual, personal, and financial growth. He was one of the longest standing pastors in the community. Joshua Albert respected and had a spirit of reverence for his pastor. Moreover, there was a councilwoman who lived close to him and his family. Respectable people in the community viewed her as a leader, and he followed suit. In high school, he was able to obtain a letter of recommendation to college from her. She was a sweet lady to him, Tonya, and Samuel. Out in the community, others sometimes saw her as intimidating and fierce. When she went somewhere to speak, she would command the attention of the audience. He was amazed to witness the complexity and depth of her character.

I asked him to share the strengths and/or qualities of these two individuals. He reflected, “I think because of the fact that people respected them. So it was something about when they spoke, people listened. When they planned and/or announced an event, folks showed up. And people were eager to hear from them. They were also seen as having ushered in change in our hometown.”

In college, he took advantage of a summer internship experience known as INROADS.<sup>1</sup> INROADS is a non-profit organization started to nurture youth in underserved populations in the areas of business and industry. The goal of the internship was to prepare Joshua Albert for corporate and community leadership. This experience proved to be integral to his journey and success in business leadership. Later he made the decision to transition and direct his efforts toward impacting children in public education as an executive level educational leader.

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<sup>1</sup> INROADS is a non-profit organization that seeks to prepare underserved youth leadership in their communities and business while placing them with corporate partners in the business industry. More information about INROAD can be located on the organization’s website: <http://www.inroads.org/>.

When he started driving, he recalled being pulled over by the police periodically. He shared with me a moment that highlighted his frustration with one of his interactions with a White police officer. This incident occurred after his college days as a young professional living in a major urban city: *His boys* were in town hanging out for a weekend. It was about 2 o'clock in the morning, and they were out riding enjoying the town after a football game. Joshua Albert was driving, heading north through downtown and preparing to merge onto a major interstate in the city. Simultaneously, there was construction happening, and there were two police officers that were directing traffic, but they weren't communicating clearly with each other. So one particular police officer told him to make the turn to get onto the interstate. He complied. Regrettably, the second police officer did not know that first police officer had told him to proceed. Hence, the officer thought he was turning out of disobedience and jumped out in front of his brand new car. He recalled being about 33 at the time of this incident. Other people in the car had consumed alcohol, but none of them were drunk. Joshua Albert brought the car to a complete stop because the second officer jumped out in the middle of the street. The officer takes his baton and pounds on the front of his car, and says, "Stop, Stop!" putting this big dent in the hood of the car.

He admitted, "And being, . . . I don't know if I would have done anything differently, but being a little bit young and arrogant, I rolled the window down and was like, 'Officer, you are out of line.' And then that's what set him off!" He pulled them over, and said, "Get out of the car; you're going to jail." Joshua Albert replied, "For what?" He pointed to the first police officer who told him to turn. Then the second police officer literally made him get out of his car and get into the back of his patrol car. He further detailed, "And that's when all of my friends were like, oh wait, this is serious. What's happening? My sister was an attorney, and so she was called immediately." Tonya and his friends worked together to get him through the situation. Joshua Albert

was detained for a couple of hours and then released. He concluded, “It was dismissed and the record expunged, but it was just like my very first experience with the police because of the fact that it was some misunderstanding between them and because I engaged with him. I wasn't yelling; I just simply said, ‘Officer, you're out of line,’ in a calm tone. I now know that he didn't expect me to engage with him.”

### **Leadership Lens: Context of School**

**Kingston (30 years old).** Kingston's elementary school days were challenging as he struggled to focus in class. He asserted, “I wasn't a dumb kid; I just couldn't focus. I refused to do the work because I'm stubborn.” He realized that he didn't have the motivation to complete the tasks and assignments placed before him. He described his grades in elementary school as awful. Kingston was retained in the third grade and “placed” into the sixth grade. He recalled being suspended too many times to count saying, “I was having a really hard time; school was *extremely difficult!*” His schools, at all levels, had a zero tolerance policy for fighting. The suspensions started in third grade for misbehavior. He spent a lot of time in the principal's office. He knew all of the administrators and office personnel in the building, and they knew him by name.

In elementary school, he noticed that administrators and teachers treated boys differently than girls. He recounted that a lot of kids had behavioral challenges. Several kids couldn't focus; they were extremely challenged to function in the regular education classroom setting. Kingston detected that teachers and administrators were ill equipped with the tools to effectively respond to the culture of the students served. More specifically, White female teachers struggled in the area of classroom management, particularly with boys. When I asked him specifically about discipline, he boldly declared that teacher and administrators, alike, didn't know how to deal with

young men. He always had female teachers, and they didn't come from households where kids responded in the same manner. He witnessed first-hand a visible disconnect between the teachers and male students. He reflected, "This also determines how they discipline students."

With frustration in their voices, teachers jarred, "I gotta write you up. I gotta suspend you!" In the fifth grade, Kingston was recommended for special education services. Mid year, he was placed in a self-contained classroom for students with disabilities. He also noticed, himself included, that they started heavily medicating students to curb their behavior. He realized the need to change his habits and work harder as he prepared for the transition to middle school.

In middle school his environment changed; hence, his focus changed. Aunt Brenda provided the structure and expectations at home that Kingston needed in order to mature at school. His school partnered with the expectations of his home, and Kingston was able to produce more fruitful results. He proudly shared, "I was no longer in special education classes in sixth grade. I was in regular education." In elementary school he earned C's, D's, and failing grades; yet, in middle school, he was a proud B/C student. He reflectively admitted, "The environment changed for me. So, it wasn't that my aunt's environment was better; it just suited me better at that time in my life. I actually did homework. I went through a process of maturing." Laughing he shared, "I always had a fear of the teachers calling home. They called anyway, but I knew that I had a responsibility at that time." He served a few detentions in middle school, but he never received a suspension in middle or high school. His interaction with administrators in middle school was very limited in comparison to elementary school. He attributed limited interaction with administrators at this level to staying out of trouble.

He attended school regularly K-12, until his senior year second semester. In middle school, he held his seventh grade math teacher in high regard, viewing Coach Collins as an influ-

ential leader in his life. He admired Coach's ability to interact with so many students while making each one feel special, while singularly holding him accountable to being a responsible young man. As a middle school student, he valued basketball cards and the freedom of hanging out with his friends.

He attended a high school with a population of approximately 1,200 students. Kingston transitioned to high school with his crew, the same set of friends. He didn't play sports; however, he enjoyed participating in the French Honor Society, a club rewarding students who excelled in French. He was more mature and focused; he was happy with how he was maturing and handling his responsibilities at home and at school. Kingston identified his high school Economics teacher as a person of influence in his life. This teacher was memorable to Kingston because he was a straight shooter. He held them to a high standard, didn't "baby" them, and he spoke the truth. His ninth grade teacher was also a standout. All of the students knew she had dyslexia, and his best friend has dyslexia. He recalled, "She kinda removed my excuse. If she can work with all of these numbers and do Algebra, then I have no excuse!"

As a high school student, he valued having a nice pair of shoes just as much as he valued completing as many credits as possible. He set and achieved his goal of earning more credits than needed for graduation. In high school, he earned B's and C's graduating with a 2.5 grade point average; there were approximately 250 students in his graduating class. I asked if he recalled interacting with his counselor. He stated, "I had one counselor, but I can't remember her name. She was not passionate about counseling students. It was just something she could do." I followed up and inquired, "So did you feel like she didn't enjoy her job?" He summarized, "It wasn't that she didn't enjoy her job; I didn't enjoy going to her." After graduating high school, he attended a technical college for a year and a half and then transitioned to working full time.

**Danny (33 years old).** In the first grade, Danny was identified as a gifted student. Consequently, he attended a Magnet School from second through fifth grades. He was a student who excelled academically and attended school regularly K-12. Danny's older brother, Michael, helped to set a high standard for him by encouraging him to bring home trophies and awards each Honors Day. He lived up to this expectation and valued the approval of his brother. Danny proudly declared that he like bringing home some *hardware* on Honors Day.

He genuinely desired to stay out of trouble. He only recalled serving one detention in middle school, and he was never suspended. Those were the days where they'd write your name on the board when you misbehaved. Danny shared the terror he felt, the fear. He didn't want to disappoint Dad or Mom.

He described his middle school band director as an individual having great influence on his life. Additionally, Mr. Caruthers, his high school principal during his freshman and sophomore years, had an amazing impact on his life. Danny reflected on his life with such affection sharing that he wished he had attended Mr. Caruthers funeral one month before our first interview. "It was like he had an imaginary rope, and you'd turn around and just come back." If students were engaged in a fight, Mr. Caruthers' words would break up the fight. He was well respected, highly visible, and he set the tone for a culture of high expectations for all students in his building. Danny declared, "Even the hardest cats respected Mr. Caruthers!"

Danny described the classroom management styles of his teachers as orderly. He recalled with detail the quote name of one of his favorite high school teachers, "The Lady." He had the distinct privilege of having her for both Pre-Calculus and Calculus. Everyone knew, "The Lady" didn't play. She never had to raise her voice for anything; her highly structured classroom ran

like a well-oiled machine. She had a gift for challenging her students at just the right level.

Whenever a student challenged her with, “I can’t!” she always responded, “Yes, you can!”

Danny’s high school had approximately 2,000 students, and he graduated in the top five percent of his class of 300. Danny doesn’t recall his high school having a zero tolerance policy, and he described his high school administrative team as effective. Their genuine care for the students was evident. Under the direction of Mr. Caruthers, his high school principal, there was consistency of expectations for teachers, staff, and the student body; everyone was on the same page. The assistant principals maintained the climate set by Mr. Caruthers. Nobody would say anything behind his back; the administrators embodied a united front, truly a team. Furthermore, Mr. Caruthers cultivated many community partnerships and valued the collaboration of community leaders to build school community. Danny saw evidence of mentors from businesses and churches within the schools. Additionally, community partners assisted with fundraising efforts for his high school.

Danny had the opportunity to participate in internship opportunities/summer camp each summer of high school. The summer following his freshman year he participated in a program hosted by the Department of Transportation at a local university. The next summer he was selected to attend an Academic Boot Camp for accelerated students. The summer after his junior year, he faced a non-academic challenge at summer camp; he had a chance to pursue a fight of a different kind. Danny had a chance to fight some good-sized roaches; he laughed providing full sound effects as he described them walking across the leaves at night. His final summer intern opportunity took place at a Medical College where he had the opportunity to work on cadavers. These experiences truly whet the appetite of a young man whose favorite subjects were math and science.

Danny operated with an admirable level of maturity as a young man in high school. When I asked him, “What do you remember being of value to you in high school,” he described how every act is setting you up for the future. He knew that even in the early stages of his high school career, he was writing his resume that college admission teams would review as they made their acceptance decisions. He had a lofty dream; he wanted to attend college on a full scholarship. Danny wanted to spare his parents the cost of using any money his father saved from working at the garage. With humility and gratefulness, he shared that his dream of completing school on full scholarship came to fruition, bachelors through doctorate!

Moreover, in addition to sharing a bond with his high school principal, he developed and sustained one with his undergraduate University President. Danny shared a unique bond with his undergraduate university president. She was a personable president known for walking the bleachers of the university’s football games addressing students by name; she’d tell any student not properly dressed, “Pull your pants up!” According to Danny, she was only in her office 5% of the time. He described her as very personable, and the student body enjoyed her genuine connection and care for them. Danny was a Presidential Scholar and enjoyed close encounters with his university president and other scholars in an intimate setting. He had the amazing opportunity to establish life long friendships with organizational leaders and witness their genuine love for the people they served.

Danny was blessed to establish a formidable relationship with one of his university professors. Actually, he had the opportunity to first meet Ms. Carpenter when he participated in the HBCU Undergraduate Program the summer before his freshman year at the university. Ms. Carpenter served as his Computer Science Instructor. When Danny first started college, he was a Computer Engineering Major. And that was the "2+3" Program where you do two years at the

local university for the Computer Science core, then complete three years at the partnering technical university in order to graduate. Previous program history data provided evidence that most students completed their Bachelor's in Engineering in five to six years. Danny contributed, "Well, let's just say . . . every semester stuff changed." So he continued going through and doing the initial coursework just fine. However, Danny said he was kind of between departments. This state of in-between became a challenge when he couldn't be considered for an award in Ms. Carpenter's department. Then, he grew weary of the requirements that the partnering tech university wanted to change, yet again.

Ms. Carpenter led the Computer Science Department and informed Danny, "Well you know, had you been a Computer Science major you could've got highest ranking Computer Science Major Award this past year. But I couldn't give it to you because you're not in my group." Danny, with his competitive edge, changed his major from the 2+3 Program to Computer Science with a Math emphasis. The university had two options: Math or Business. Ms. Carpenter advised that a Math emphasis would be the most beneficial for his future. Her words of wisdom bore much fruit!

Danny earned his doctorate in Agricultural Engineering. And with that, he was able to bypass several courses (i.e. Calculus 3, Differential Equations); he did not have to go back and retake a lot of the Math courses because he already completed them. Where if he'd done the Business emphasis, he wouldn't have had the necessary foundation. He reaped the rewards of heeding the direction of his professor and mentor. So he finished the Computer Science Program with Ms. Carpenter. He described her as excellent, exciting, and exemplary! Her classroom exuded a culture of high expectations.

She was so exemplary in her teaching practices that she caught flack because of her style and standard. A lot of the students complained to the University President that she was too hard. Danny served on a panel defending her, speaking on her behalf of how he valued her as a professor. He recounted being called in by the President, the same one that he spoke about that knew the students by name at the football games. She called him in to talk about Ms. Carpenter. He was asked if he witnessed her being unfair or overbearing? He boldly proclaimed, "No, she's preparing us for what we're gonna face in the work force." Through it all, Danny maintained a good relationship with Ms. Carpenter even after graduating from college.

**William Grant (37 years old).** He recalled being bullied in elementary school because he wasn't a fighter. The bullies didn't completely terrify him because his father worked as a history teacher and football coach at the feeder high school, just 150 feet away from his elementary school. He contended, "So, there was never a time where I didn't feel I couldn't make a phone call or get to him, or he get to me. If anything were to ever happen, he was just a hop and skip away." William Grant admitted that all of his elementary teachers were very influential to his growth and development throughout elementary school. He assured me that his school attendance was regular admitting, "My parents didn't play that missing school stuff. If you were sick, you're gonna try anyway. 'You call me if you need me, but you're gonna try'."

In third grade, he learned how to play chess from Mr. Terry. William Grant was on the chess team. Mr. Terry was 6'2, 310 pound Jamaican man that loved chess. With amazing precision he had the ability to transfer his love for chess with children. He reflected, "He talked real slow. And to be honest with you, him talking real slow probably taught me the game of chess." With pride, he shared that he was crowned the Chess champion at the end of third grade.

He wanted desperately to make good grades in school because he wanted to make his father proud. His transition from middle school to high school proved to be a challenge that he had to work through. The academic workload increased, and he started playing football for the first time. His coaches and parents partnered together and used the *privilege* of playing sports as leverage. William Grant knew the expectation; he had to be academically responsible before stepping foot on the football field. He buckled down, started doing his homework consistently, sought additional help after school, and graduated with a 2.9 grade point average. He recalled receiving speech services as a second grader. Next, he was diagnosed with dyslexia in elementary school; however, he received the proper supports that allowed him to experience success in the classroom. William Grant remembered, “I was seeing my *e*’s and *b*’s backwards. Everything was backwards.” He admitted that Reading and English were his least favorite subjects. Correspondingly, Math and Science surfaced as his favorite subjects.

He received additional instructional support for reading in an after school program. The after school program was sandwiched in immediately after school and before his seasonal sports practice at the school. The intervention lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes. This intervention simultaneously provided the structure he needed to stay out of trouble during this window of time when other students would get in trouble, whereby they were not under the care of an adult.

William Grant recalled being assigned detention once in middle school; however, he couldn’t recall why he was assigned detention. Additionally, he was assigned an out of school suspension for fighting as a freshman in high school. His school district operated under the umbrella of zero tolerance policy and practice. He recalled, “A couple of punches were thrown. It was my freshman year. It was a high school senior trying to mess with me, and I wasn’t letting it happen!” In his reflection of school discipline and how consequences were assigned, he felt ad-

ministrators and teachers were a bit more lenient on female students. He surmised, “I guess it was to appeal to their emotional side. They were always a bit tougher on males.”

He described Mr. Carter, his Black male Biology teacher, as a strong motivator. Mr. Carter knew William Grant was efficient with numbers and he encouraged him toward that end. As the educator, he knew that his student craved the positive praise and attention. He enjoyed having someone who looked like him leading and guiding both his academic and personal development. Biology came alive; the concepts leaped off the page. Mr. Carter appealed to William Grant’s need to move and to use his hands to conceptualize and make the abstract, concrete. His kinesthetic teaching style, visual teaching style, and movement based teaching practices activated and engaged him and many others daily bringing the classroom to life!

I asked William Grant, “Reflecting on your high school experience, what stands out to you the most?” Without hesitation he confirmed, “The ability to be around my dad on a daily basis. It was different because he wasn't coaching anymore. And being that he wasn't coaching anymore, it allowed him to nurture a little bit more.” He clarified his point describing, “And what I mean by nurture is to be able to listen, instead of being in that coaching mode all the time. And it gave him the ability to mentor me as well as be a dad.” He concluded, “You know so, I think it allowed our relationship to grow a lot stronger than it was prior to me being in high school.” This season of bonding gave William Grant the opportunity to, throughout his high school years, know his father more intimately. Furthermore, it afforded him the opportunity to learn who he was as a person, as a man - in terms of what he cared about, who he cared about, and how much he cared about it. He undeniably knew that his dad cared about him.

His coaches played an influential role in his life, especially in high school. His relationships with his coaches were solid. William Grant revealed, “They saw me as a leader. They

would use me to show skill sets, different exercises, drills, or whatever. They would use me to communicate with some players sometimes if they didn't feel like they were getting across to them." The coaches identified him as a natural born leader, and they nurtured that ability and guided him in the right direction.

Likewise, the high school counselor was one he identified as a person of influence in his life. He bonded with one of the counselor's at the school, not the counselor assigned to him because of his last name. William Grant established a relationship with Mr. Battle because he and Mr. Battle's son played sports together since upper elementary school. Mr. Battle also refereed for the basketball league that he played in during middle school.

He remembered that his high school principal, Mr. Peterson, was very active in the community. William Grant recalled seeing him at sporting events away from the school. The principal also had a working relationship with the community center; he recalled seeing him at the community center from time to time. Moreover, Mr. Peterson positively affected the school climate. He described his high school as welcoming, upbeat, challenging, and fun. He led by example; he was hands-on and highly visible in classrooms and in the hallways. Mr. Peterson engaged students in conversation when he greeted students as they arrived at school, in classrooms, during the lunch period, and at school events. He was a Black man, and William Grant saw a reflection of himself in this school leader. He was revered and respected as a man of influence in the school and in the local community. William Grant portrayed his school leader in the following light: "The atmosphere of the room shifted immediately when he walked in. He could control the room with a snap of his finger, a look, or the influx of his voice. Hands down, Mr. Peterson controlled that school!" Students were open to his corrective action and followed his lead.

He was presented with the opportunity to partake in internship opportunities in high school. However, he made a conscious decision to forgo them, as his focus outside of academics was on playing sports. He was once again presented with an internship opportunity towards the end of his college career. William Grant attended an HBCU in the Southeastern part of the United States. He paused when he told me he passed up the opportunity because he made the decision to play professional football. He proudly shared that he was able to take full advantage of an internship opportunity when he returned to college after retiring from professional football and earning his bachelor's degree in Physical Education. He now serves as a football coach for a private Christian school.

***Influential leader interview with college football coach.*** William Grant considers himself blessed to have Coach in his life. He shared that Coach had become an amazing mentor in his life. However, he assured me that had his father been living, I would be speaking with his father for the influential leader.

Coach met William Grant during his senior year of high school during recruitment season. Coach described their relationship as “an excellent, primarily because he was a quarterback. I was the head coach, offensive coordinator, and quarterback coach. So we had a very close relationship all throughout his college career.” He categorized William Grant's strengths as honest, sincere, hard working, dedicated, driven, and determined. Coach purposed, “He was committed to be a success in football and in life.” He admired his pursuit and dedication. Furthermore Coach predicted and was convinced, “I do believe that he will be a smashing success in life!”

He watched William Grant grow and mature into a fine leader. He portrayed how the quarterback on the team is poised and positioned to serve as a leader. William Grant was suitably fit, prepped, and primed for this position. Coach witnessed how he matured academically, while

simultaneously maturing as a natural born leader on the football field. He observed, “He became more serious and more convinced that there is a roadmap to success.” Furthermore, Coach provided a glimpse into the mutual benefit of their relationship. He surmised, “There’s an old saying, no one is too poor to give. So, just because he is a young man, and I am an older man, doesn’t mean I can’t learn from him.” He positioned himself both to give and to receive.

**Joshua Albert (39 years old).** He found himself nestled in the books and tucked away in library corners at his school. His mother was a lover of books and nurtured the same love for reading in her son. Moreover, Joshua Albert’s mother took the time to partner with his teachers to ensure his academic success. He recalled seeing his mom at school meeting with his teachers to discuss his academic progress, struggles, and successes along his educational journey.

With heartfelt appreciation and gratitude, he reflected upon his K-12 support system. He reported, “Even in the first grade, there were people around who breathed life into me.” Miss Periwinkle, his first grade teacher, was the first to make him feel like a leader. Joshua Albert recalled his first ever “Show and Tell” in his favorite teacher’s class. He had bunny rabbits at home. Miss Periwinkle told him, "Go ahead and just bring the rabbit." So he brought his rabbits to school, and his decision to do so was a blockbuster hit with his peers. He declared, “It was the first time somebody made me feel like a leader! Because what happened is, I dared to be different, to take a risk, to do something big and unpredictable! Everybody else in the class was going to bring an inanimate object. I brought something that was living.” He was so encouraged and appreciative of the opportunity to lead!

In the second grade, he shared an impactful moment with negative repercussions. Joshua Albert remembered some of the academic lessons from his White female teacher. Her personality just didn't stand out as much as Miss Periwinkle’s, but she knew her content. The two got off to

bad start that affected him for a long time. Sometimes he tends to have what some have described as a natural scowl. He clarified, "That's not how I feel, but apparently that's the facial expression I'll give off. And I was looking at my second grade teacher one day, and I proceeded to ask her a question." And she asserted, "Please don't look at me like that. Your eyes scare me!" So from that point on it became very difficult for him to look people in the eyes because he was afraid that he was scaring people. He specifically shared this encounter with me to emphasize, "One sentence can change a person's whole life. And that's all it takes, one sentence. You can either breathe life or you can speak death just that quickly in a child's life and negatively impact the trajectory of their lives." He had other memories of his second grade teacher, but this is the one that left an imprint forever etched in his mind 30 plus years later.

He admitted, "My teacher support group was very crucial to my success." The students were ability grouped in one of the following tracks: vocational, general, and college preparatory. He was an A/B student, but he always got in trouble for talking too much. His teachers nurtured his gift in and encouraged his participation in Drama. He found a niche in art and loved the performing arts. Joshua Albert participated in many art contests, and he enjoyed writing. He brought home numerous awards for both art and writing.

"By the fourth grade, the teachers has sized us up and sent their predictions of who we would become *on up the line* to the next teacher." The community was very small. Teachers planned within their vertical teams and made it a practice to discuss students yet to matriculate through the gifted program feeder pattern of schools. Joshua Albert and his family were committed to ensuring that he was at school regularly. He had perfect attendance K-12 until missing one day his senior year of high school.

As a middle school student, he recalled being influenced the most by his peers and his family. Tonya was cool, and he admired her and her selection of friends. He remembered being both popular and smart and it was acceptable to be both in middle and high school. At this age and stage of his schooling, he valued performing well in school. He kept hearing from Tonya and his teachers that he needed to perform well in seventh and eighth grades so he would be positioned to take honors courses in high school. So he was diligent to put in the work to be successful. Joshua Albert remembered wanting to be in the marching band. Tonya was in the marching band, and he too had a dream of being in the marching band. The dream became reality in ninth grade!

Joshua Albert didn't run into a lot of discipline issues in middle school or high school. Yet, he had one incident where he got into a fight with a fellow classmate in 7th grade and was assigned out of school suspension for three days. He was devastated because he wasn't that person who would typically get in trouble, especially like that. But that was the only time he recalled ever having any real discipline issues where he was excluded from school.

He learned how to build solid and lasting relationships with his teachers. He shared that his teachers held him academically and socially accountable to high standards. Ms. Mercer, his English and Drama teacher, felt like an aunt. He described her as loving, caring, and nurturing. More specifically, "She was a no-nonsense nurturer. She loved on us, but then she pushed us at the same time." His favorite teachers were respectful and complimentary of his work. Joshua Albert admitted, "So I feel like being able to develop those close relationships where you could talk to someone about what was going on personally or professionally, and they also were relevant. Our teachers knew what was happening in school and outside of school. They knew about us academically and personally. Like they would know about who was dating who, and what was

happening. And they weren't being messy; they were just aware." His teachers were personable and engaged.

He gravitated to leadership roles, clubs, and opportunities at school. He was a part of the Student Government, Newspaper, Yearbook, Key Club, Rotaract and Beta Club. He started serving and volunteering in his local community in high school. Rotaract was an extension of the Rotary Club, a national service organization providing the opportunity for him to serve his local community.

During the spring of his junior in high school, Joshua Albert participated in a Pre-Freshman Seminar at an HBCU in the South. This prestigious institution later became his alma mater. He recalled, "It was just like this incredible experience when I got there. I was just like, 'Oh wow! I'm not an anomaly'." Everyone he met was at the top of their class, a scholar athlete, Student Government Association President, marching band member, a leader in some area of influence in their respective school. He felt like all of these people were his *true* peers. Additionally, his peers looked like him. He decided, "Oh, this is where I need to be!"

His high school celebrated seniors at their Annual Class Day. His senior class had 181 students graduating from a high school of approximately 1,000 students. This celebration took place at the end of the academic year, and the school community would publicly recognize every student admitted to college and/or receiving scholarships. Mr. Paulk also included the community in this celebration, and Class Day was well supported by stakeholders. The excitement of the day was first etched in his memory when he attended to celebrate and honor his older sister, Tonya. He, too, longed for the day to have family, administrators, teachers, community supporters, and peers applaud his hard work, diligence, and accomplishments. This proved to be a motivating factor for him. At the conclusion of his senior year, he finally had his day of glory!

Joshua Albert admired several characteristics of his principal. He portrayed Mr. Paulk in the following light: “Many people called him Joe Clark because he was so loud and no-nonsense and bold and knew everybody in the community and knew everybody's Momma . . . could call your Momma on speed dial immediately.” Many felt his authoritative presence as he walked through the halls. He was visible. Joshua Albert admitted, “You could just sense his presence, you know the gravitas that he brought to the school.” Mr. Paulk made himself accessible to students, staff and parents, and he was very personable. He was mindful not to take advantage of the fact that his principal was also a deacon at his church. Joshua Albert surmised that there was a feeling of mutual respect between him and Mr. Paulk.

Finally, Mr. Paulk led a cohesive administrative team. Students felt the team was accessible and genuinely authentic! The rules were clear, and all members of the administrative team held all students equally accountable to the standards set in place. Joshua Albert paid them the compliment, “It felt like an extension of family, almost.”

*Influential leader interview with high school principal.* Joshua Albert’s principal first encountered this young leader when he was a young boy growing up in the church. He described Joshua Albert as a self-starter, a motivated young man. He detailed further, “He thinks out of the box. I mean, he doesn’t have to see someone do it before he feels he can do it.” In essence Principal Paulk inherently knew he was witnessing the making of a forerunner. He observed Joshua Albert being reared by his mother and grandmother in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

Joshua Albert’s principal saw greatness in him. The ability to rise to the challenge was evident. He shared, “You put him in a group. I would say right now to tell you the truth, if you put him in a room for a long time with a group, you come back, and he will be on top of it.” Principal Paulk was excited, honored, and pleased to know that Joshua Albert viewed him as a

influential leader in his life. Furthermore, he shared his excitement of watching Joshua Albert transition from an early career in business to one at the executive level of leadership in education. Principal Paulk attributed some of Joshua Albert's success to the layers of support in his home, community, and school. He detailed, "The people in the community always saw him as a well respected, well mannered youngster coming up who conducted himself well in the presence of others and the presence of adults. He's had plenty of help from the church and the teachers from the community." Principal Paulk further clarified, "He was supported not only by the teachers and administrators at the school, he was also supported by his peers. We tried to instill this type of pride in our students at the high school and put it in part of the culture." Moreover, Principal Paulk was a supporter, and he assured me that Joshua Albert flourished in his environment. Over the years he had evidence that his career and calling was a life shaping business. He took great joy in seeing youngsters flourish, matriculate, graduate, and leave to lead serving their communities, the world, and the greater good.

### **Discussion**

This study was designed to champion and celebrate the structures of support within the context of the home, community, and school for boys of color as they navigate the educational system and beyond evading any interaction with the juvenile justice and/or criminal justice system. The central question guiding this phenomenological research was: *What is the nature of the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline?* More specifically, I explored: *What roles do the leadership in the home, community, and school play in the men's successful navigation of the educational system and beyond?* The design of this phenomenological study was not to generalize for all men of color, but to listen and learn from six men and the influential leaders in their lives. Hence, this discussion will detail the key findings of the

research, the implications for educational leaders, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of this study.

### **Key Findings**

Approximately 13 hours of phenomenological interviews were conducted with six men who evaded the school to prison pipeline coupled with two hours of interviews with four influential leaders. This section unveils and encapsulates the major findings of this phenomenological research that emerged from my analysis of the 22 interviews. Presented are the emerging themes from the three invariant horizons of Moustakas' (1994) modification of phenomenological analysis. Seven key findings emerged from the invariant horizon: leadership in the home; six key findings emerged from the invariant horizon: leadership in the community; and five key findings emanated from the invariant horizon: leadership in the school.

**Leadership lens: Context of home.** Home is a place to be supported and loved. Hence, both traditional and non-traditional structures of support can serve as champions of justice for boys and young men of color. This study confirmed that this structure of support can be comprised of and lead by two parents, a single parent/guardian, grandmother, aunt, or a combination of the aforementioned structures. Home is not defined by the titles of the people who live there, rather it is defined by the love given and support provided to the child.

Harper and Associates (2014), in *Succeeding in the City*, framed that an overwhelming majority of the 325 high school students interviewed in a qualitative study highlighting the success of urban Black and Latino males received powerful messages about the importance and value of school from their parents and other family members. This key finding resonates with the sentiment conveyed from all four of the men's stories portrayed in the results section of this phenomenological study. Furthermore, Jeynes (2015) presented a meta-analysis of 66 studies

providing evidence that the association between a father's involvement and the educational outcome of their child proved to be statistically significant. Likewise, three of the four men's lived experiences compliment this work. Additionally, Jeynes (2016) examined 42 studies in an additional meta-analysis delving into the relationship between parental involvement and the academic achievement of African American pre-kindergarten children through college freshman. Overall, parental involvement was associated with greater educational outcomes for African American students. The following presentation of findings yields the details of an intimate look into the structures of support in the home as the parent(s)/guardian champions the success of their son.

***Presence and strong influence of father.*** A prevalent finding and influence in three of the four men's lives was the presence of their father. Danny grew up with his father in the home while William Grant and Joshua Albert knew the influence of a loving father outside of the home. William Grant's father transitioned outside of the home after divorcing his mother, yet made an intentional decision to live close and stay intimately involved in the rearing and life of his son. Joshua Albert's mother and father were never married, yet he saw his father weekly. His father was influential in his life, and he considered it admirable that his father made the decision to be closely involved and intimately connected in his life.

***Loving and caring mother.*** Three of the four men experienced the care, love, direction, and guidance of their mother. Danny was able to witness firsthand his mother sacrifice her desire to work outside the home to stay home and provide for the needs of her family serving as a homemaker. William Grant was amazed to witness and learn the gift of forgiveness from his mother. A mother who released him into the care of his father during his high school years to ensure that her son would have home access to his father during that season of his life. Little did she know, that after high school, William Grant's father would pass, and her son would have the

memories of the time they shared together to carry him on into adulthood. Joshua Albert's mom was a steady force in his life, and she helped to cultivate and encourage his love for reading and learning that has since carried him to success.

***Partnership between father and mother.*** The partnership between the mother and father provided a structure of support that guided their sons to successfully complete high school and evade the school to prison pipeline. This partnership was evident in three unique portrayals. For Joshua Albert, it was a partnership between his father and mother who never married yet shared a love and strong commitment for their son's success. For William Grant, this partnership was exemplified through grace after they put the love for their son first after divorce. Finally, this partnership was manifested in the union of marriage, whereby married parents raised Danny. I contend that all three partnerships signified some level of sacrificial love for their son.

***Grandmother as pillar.*** Three of the men's grandmothers were strong supporters of the family. Kingston was raised for the foundational years, birth through 12, by his grandmother. He recalls with great detail the manners Granny taught him that has allowed him the ability to navigate the K-12 educational system as well as drive away from traffic stops from police on average of eight to ten times a year. William Grant's grandmother had a gift for gathering family together often including the Annual Easter Egg Hunt, and she cared for him and his cousins daily after school. He detailed how everything in the family had to go through Grandma first. Joshua Albert's Granny was the matriarch of the family, and she was a prayer warrior, homemaker, and resourceful leader in the home.

***Older influential sibling.*** Two of the four men basked, developed, and flourished under the watchful eye of an older influential sibling. Danny's older brother helped to establish high academic expectations for him. Michael encouraged him to bring home *academic hardware*, or

trophies, often. Additionally, Joshua Albert admitted his gratefulness as his older sister, Tonya, paved the way for him to college and helped choral resources to get his record cleared after a traffic stop.

***Supportive aunt/uncle.*** The support, love, and guidance of an aunt or uncle were evident in the lived experiences of three of the men's lives. Kingston transitioned to live with his aunt as a teenager. The structure and culture of high expectations for academic success and responsibility resulted in him matriculating through middle and high school in a regular education setting and him working as a teenager to cover his expenses for his own toiletries and some personal care. William Grant's Uncle Charles was included in the fabric of his support system. His uncle's children were apart of their close-knit family that played and completed homework daily at Grandma's house. Finally, Joshua Albert benefitted from a supportive aunt that lived in his home along with his grandmother and mother.

***Faith modeled in the home.*** The role of faith in God played a pivotal role in the lives of three of the four composite characters. Danny's parents were committed to displaying the love of Christ through their marriage. Furthermore, he was raised in the church and began serving as a church musician at the tender age of seven. William Grant recalled being raised in the church and seeing his father pray consistently for everything. Finally, Joshua Albert's mother and grandmother made sure he was brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. These living examples of reliance on God via the faith of the adults in their lives proved to be essential.

**Leadership lens: Context of community.** A student's community can provide an extension of family bestowing an additional layer of structure, support, and access to additional resources in order to champion the success of boys and young men of color. In Harper and Associates' (2014) *Succeeding in the City*, high school students declared that they appreciated a "sense

of community” even in high-crime areas (p. 17). This confirms William Grant’s feeling of his high poverty, high crime community where he felt safe because everyone knew his family. Furthermore, my interview with Joshua Albert’s father confirmed with a key finding in Harper and Associates’ (2014) *Succeeding in the City* report that school was his way out from having to produce the same level of manual labor as his father (p. 17). A culture of high expectations within the context of home and community proved to be a key finding for 415 Black and Latino males purposed to successfully graduate from high school and navigate a path of success to postsecondary education. *Succeeding in the City* found that “even when their behaviors or school outcomes may have suggested otherwise, students said their family, church, and community members rarely failed to acknowledge their potential for greatness” (Harper & Associates, 2014, p. 15). Hence, family, church, and community championed and celebrated the young men’s success. The following presentation of findings conveys the importance of educational leaders valuing the power and promise of community stakeholders championing the success, value, and contribution of boys and young men of color in their communities.

***Involvement in summer camp/internship.*** All four of the men benefitted from the opportunity to participate in a camp or internship opportunity during the summer months. Kingston was exposed to a local HBCU as a middle school student for two consecutive summers for a sports camp providing him the opportunity to interact and engage with young men across the metropolitan area and various male leaders. Danny also participated in internship opportunities and summer camps hosted by local colleges and universities while in high school. William Grant was offered the opportunity to partake in internship opportunities in high school; yet, he declined to participate. However, later after returning to college after retiring from professional football, he opted to take full advantage of an internship opportunity. Joshua Albert participated in a

summer internship program; this experience helped to prepare him for future success. Additionally, he had the opportunity to participate in an intramural sports camp at the local college one summer.

***Exposure to community change agents.*** Three of the men were exposed to change agents within their local communities. Kingston revered the local community farmers and mechanics as community leaders. He admired their ability to not only lead in the community; he admired their ability to lead their families. Danny joined his church pastor in serving the local community. He recalled seeing first hand how his pastor had a heart for people when they went through passing out boxed fans in the staunch heat of the summer. Joshua Albert distinguished his pastor and a local councilwoman as change agents in his community. He observed their influence in the community coupled with their compassion for people; he found admirable.

***School leaders involved in the community.*** Three of the four composite characters attested to their school leaders serving in their local communities. Kingston applauded and admired how coaches from his high school volunteered in the local community and used their voice for the greater good. William Grant witnessed the leadership of his coaches in his local community. Moreover, his father, who was the former high school football coach, served as a shining example and leader in the local community. Joshua Albert first met his high school principal at church. Mr. Paulk was very invested in the church community and local community, and he welcomed and partnered with local and church leaders to support the work of the school community.

***Local church engagement.*** All four men experienced the power and engagement of the local church serving as leaders in their local communities. Kingston witnessed the pastors and members from the local serve families in need throughout the community after transitioning to live with Aunt Brenda. Danny was active in his local church at an early age, and the church

members were actively engaged in his life. He learned the art of establishing and effectively maintaining relationships with adults, especially when in a position of leadership, at a very early age. William Grant attended church regularly with his father and a few times each year with his mother. Joshua Albert's grandmother, mother, and aunt attended church regularly. Additionally, he was afforded opportunities to learn how to stand before the congregation and speak as a young boy coupled with recognition of his academic success by his church family.

***Mentorship access.*** Two of my four men had direct access to male mentors. Danny was privy to establish mentoring relationships with men in his church over the years. William Grant was exposed to male mentors on a weekly basis at the local community center. The community center served as a hub where urban youth could find shelter from the streets.

***Work opportunities in the community.*** The opportunity to work as a teenager in their local community proved to be a necessary outlet for three of the four men. Kingston's Aunt Brenda worked diligently to ensure that he would have the opportunity to work at the local park as a summer camp counselor. Aunt Brenda was alerted to this creative outlet by one of their neighbors who also worked at the park site. Danny worked both at the church as a musician and assisted at his father and uncle's garage on Sundays. He had various opportunities to serve members of his community in excellence. William Grant experienced a variety of options for work as a teenager in a community rich with diversity of people and in experiences.

**Leadership lens: Context of school.** A highly effective school principal leading high performing, fully invested teachers and professionals, is the hope of every child. Warren (2016) examined the myriad of human relationships, both inside and outside of the school, required to make a school function. The relationships and behaviors of the adults in schools significantly impact the success or failure of students (Barth, 1990; Warren, 2016). Stakeholders, within the

context of school, include individuals who work within the school or individuals outside of the building who partner with school leaders to ensure the institution's success (Warren, 2016). Accordingly, school leaders and administrators, teachers, students, parents, police officers, counselors, custodians, community residents, and business leaders can serve as stakeholders each bringing a unique set of skills to the school community. In essence, "each stakeholder supports the fulfillment of the school's mission and vision, even though he or she may not be the educational professional charged with maintaining pedagogical excellence and integrity" (Warren, 2016, p. 23).

Harper and Associates (2014) found that numerous participants described their school environments as "family-oriented" (p. 20). Furthermore the *Succeeding in the City* study featured students who quickly named their relationships with their favorite teachers, reminisced about and their bond with these champions, and detailed a culture of high expectations set within the context of school (Harper & Associates, 2014, p. 21). Similarly, three of the four men portrayed in the results section of this study highlighted that school was a place where they were nurtured, challenged, and celebrated by caring and competent educators. Furthermore, Amechi et al. (2016) asserted "despite perceived and real troubles, many students regard their experiences at HBCUs as positive" (p. 113). This finding was confirmed in this phenomenological study, as three of the four men's stories revealed a positive reflection of their undergraduate experience at a HBCU. The following section of key findings explores the collaboration of stakeholders and their collective efforts, talents, skills, and investments to champion the success of Kingston, Danny, William Grant, and Joshua Albert.

***Parents and educators as partners.*** All four men advanced from the partnership between their parent/guardian and the educators charged with nurturing them. Kingston's Granny and

Aunt Brenda ensured that he attended school regularly. Aunt Brenda supported the culture of high expectations at his new school and made sure he was prepared daily with his homework. Danny and William Grant's detailed how their parents worked closely with the teachers to ensure that he attended regularly and flourished as a student. Moreover, Joshua Albert also attended school regularly, and he recalled witnessing his mother meet regularly with his teachers K-12 to solidify a partnership for his success.

***Leadership opportunities for students.*** The four men flourished when given the opportunity to lead both inside and outside of the classroom. Kingston was invited to participate in the French Honor Society because he excelled in French. Danny shined as a section leader in the band, and he wore his responsibility in the position as a badge of honor. William Grant soared in Chess Club and on the football field as team quarterback. Likewise, Joshua Albert assumed a variety of leadership opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom including Beta Club, Yearbook, and Student Government.

***Strong student/teacher relationships.*** Three of the four men learned the benefit of developing and fostering strong relationships with their teachers. Danny developed a great relationship with his band director, Pre-Calculus/Calculus teacher, and a university professor; he admitted that all were influential in his life. William Grant also flourished under the watchful eye of several teachers that he established firm relationships with, coaches and teachers like. Joshua Albert described meaningful bonds formed with teachers from elementary through high school. He contended that his relationships with his teachers were crucial to his success.

***Strong principal leadership.*** Three men detailed their perception of strong principal leadership. Danny, William Grant, and Joshua Albert described their principals as having an amazing impact on their lives, helping to establish a culture of high expectations for their stu-

dents, being highly visible, and serving as a respected leader in their communities. All three also recalled their principals leading highly functional, effective, and caring administrative teams. Moreover, all three experienced their principals inviting and welcoming community stakeholders to engage and partner with the school community.

***Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.*** All four men experienced the impact of HBCU. Kingston had a brief experience on a HBCU campus as a middle school student participating in their sports camp over the course of two summers. Danny attended a HBCU where he was a Presidential Scholar whereby, he benefitted from establishing a relationship with the university president. Additionally, Danny experienced the impact of a strong university president; she was personable and also consistently visible. William Grant relished his experience at his HBCU of choice and the friends and experiences that it afforded to him. Similarly, Joshua Albert lovingly recalled the days of growth, development, challenge, and excitement at his Alma matter, also a HBCU.

## **Implications**

**A charge for educational leaders.** Harper and Associates (2014) documented “the positive effects of families, communities, teachers, school leaders, and educational policies and practices on student achievement” in the *Succeeding in the City* Report (p. 1). Harper and Associates’ (2014) study, in partnership with the New York City Black and Latino Male High School Achievement Study, portrayed the journey of 415 students from 40 public high schools detailing how both in school and out of school, they established aspirations of attending college, positioned themselves to be college ready, and maneuvered the pathway to postsecondary education. This phenomenological research builds upon Harper and Associates’ (2014) aim to highlight the praiseworthy educational trajectories of Black and Latino men on the path to success using an

asset-based lens. In essence, the stories of Kingston, Danny, William Grant, and Joshua Albert are designed to fuel the narrative using asset-based messaging, providing empirical research on the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline. The aforementioned key findings provide a piece of the puzzle, or the empirical evidence, that educational leaders have, are, and can champion justice for boys and young men of color to ensure that these young men not only evade the school to prison pipeline but successfully navigate the K-12 educational system and beyond.

Warren (2016) contended that actively “tending to stakeholder relationships may be key to developing empirically supported, asset-based, anti-deficit interventions that enable the academic success of Black boys” (p. 21). Therefore, educational leaders are charged with identifying, developing, and sustaining strong partnerships with home and community in order for boys and young men of color to succeed. Moreover, educational leaders and the students they serve benefit from cultivating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships with all stakeholders to help young men of color navigate the K-12 educational system and beyond while evading the school to prison pipeline. As evidence in one of the key findings of this research, leaders should work diligently with teachers and staff to ensure that parental partnerships are championed in the school community. Consequently, principals who understand, maximize, and leverage their community relationships, in order to grant access to additional opportunities for boys of color, expand *the village*, or school community, and resources for these students.

Inherently, educators serve as gatekeepers, granting or denying access to educational opportunities for students. More succinctly, principals, school resource officers, probation officers, and social workers serve as first responders in the school discipline domain (Chiariello, 2013). School leaders are charged with building the capacity of all personnel in the school building. A

culturally responsive school community is the responsibility of all stakeholders, with classroom teachers at the forefront. Moreover, Fraise and Brooks (2015) commissioned a call for leaders examining their practice to include culturally relevant leadership whereby leaders “embrace the unique culture of every student” (p. 17). More specifically, “educational administrators at the school and district level and building principals in particular are key to establishing and fostering the culture and climate of their schools, their epistemologies, attitudes, and assumptions concerning race and culture, and their implications for learning, must be an important part of the discourse concerning culturally relevant and antiracist education” (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011, pp. 588-589). Boys and young men of color need and deserve school leaders clothed in the armor of culturally relevant leadership championing their success.

Whereas, students interface the most with classroom teachers; ultimately, teacher’s “daily decisions can help divert students from the school to prison pipeline” (Chiariello, 2013, p. 41). Hence, school leaders must ensure that all staff members engage in on-going, job embedded culturally relevant professional development in order to develop and/or enhance this necessary skill set to support the growth and development of all children, particularly boys and young men of color. The charge for school leaders to build teacher capacity, as well as position themselves to develop their own is paramount. Organizations, like the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color,<sup>2</sup> provide a national platform and network for collaboration amongst school leaders focused on improving the educational outcomes of boys of color. Will you join the movement of not only changing the narrative surrounding boys and young men of color, but serve as one of their champions?

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<sup>2</sup> Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC) is a non-profit organization committed to connecting and supporting school leaders on a mission to improve the social, emotional, and academic development of boys and young men of color. More information about COSEBOC can be found on the organization’s website: <http://www.coseboc.org>.

**Implications for policy and practice.** In light of both the literature focusing on the contextual factors impacting the school to prison pipeline and the key findings from this study affirming the promise and practices of leaders championing justice for men of color, implications for policy and practice become critical for leaders and policymakers. In grappling with the data from this study, I have come to a number of salient conclusions about zero tolerance (ZT) policy and practice. Two men in this study described ZT policy and practice as staples in their school communities. Yet, they successfully navigated the K-12 educational system. I surmise in both of these cases that the practice of zero tolerance policy in their two schools was implemented in such a way that student needs, not the needs of the adults in the building, were placed at the forefront. Furthermore, there are lessons to be learned from the leaders, *within the home, community, and school*, in this phenomenological study.

In examining how central office should assess and respond to the injustices and inequalities of ZT policy and practice, attention should be given to the root of the injustices and inequalities. Central office leadership, along with the support of local school boards, should closely evaluate their practice and implementation of ZT to uncover how pushing students out of school fuels the school to prison pipeline. Smith and Harper's (2015) *Disproportionate Impact of K-12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States* uncovered the grave inequity of disproportionality on Black students in 13 southern states. Zero tolerance policy and practice lays a trap for students to fall victim to the STPP. Swift action must be taken to counteract this injustice and inequity. Remarkably, deconstructing the STPP requires policy and practice reformation.

Ladson-Billings (2015), in her acceptance lecture of the Social Justice Award during the American Educational Research Association's Annual Meeting, issued a clarion call for justice.

She commenced stating, “What we’re seeking and fighting for is *Justice . . . Just Justice!*” The recipient of the Social Justice Award argued, “Social justice is not expansive enough” (Ladson-Billings, 2015). Ladson-Billings (2015) pointed to the effectiveness of restorative justice methods while drawing attention to ZT, policies and practices that funnel the school to prison pipeline.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) contended that institutions, particularly schools, are structuring inequity intentionally and deliberately pushing students of color into positions of mediocrity and subservience. “School-based referrals to the juvenile justice court system represent such an important entry point into the prison system;” consequently, central office leadership’s understanding of the methods and practice through which students are referred is paramount (González, 2012, p. 293). When faced with an almost complete lack of evidence that ZT has improved school safety, central office leadership must look to alternatives for safeguarding children in the nation’s schools such as restorative justice policy and practice (González, 2012; Pavelka, 2013; Shippen, Patterson, Green & Smitherman, 2012). The demand for *Justice . . . Just, Justice!* requires the attention of those who have accepted the assignment and responsibility of leadership!

**Recommendations for further research.** The salient work of championing justice for boys and young men of color requires strategic and targeted focus. Howard (2014) offered a prescription for researchers and practitioners detailing “cautions, concerns, and considerations” for work concerning Black males (p. 133). The promise of justice requires swift action from those in positions of authority. Researchers must: (1) confront race as a variable in evaluating the school experiences of Black males; (2) recognize the complexity and history of Black males against the backdrop of previous research in the United States; and (3) “put forward considerations for fu-

ture research on Black males that is informed by new paradigms, transformative frameworks and methods, and an overall mode of inquiry and approach to teaching that are concerned with transforming the life experiences of Black males” (Howard, 2014, p. 133). Future research must be more explicit and strategic at targeting the systems of inequity and creating systems that promote equity and justice for all children.

Whereas this phenomenological study lends the voice of Black males in an effort to spotlight the structures of support from leaders who championed their success, future research is needed that also incorporates the voice of young men of color from an asset-based lens. Recommendations for further research include research agendas framed from an asset-based framework coupled with an expansion on this current study to include a deeper investigation including phenomenological interviews with school systems and leaders who are effectively implementing restorative justice policy and practice.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following limitations of this phenomenological research have surfaced. Specifically, Patton (2002) asserted that in qualitative research, results are not generalized to the larger population; rather, the purpose is to understand the phenomenon. Hence, the findings from this study cannot speak for all Black men who have successfully navigated the K-12 educational system and evade the school to prison pipeline.

Additionally, time was a limitation of this study. The educational leadership professional doctorate program is a three year accelerated program with a succinct timeline. Due to time constraints, I consciously made the decision to aggressively move forward with a participant pool ranging in age from 30 – 41 instead of the desirable age range of 18-41. I limited the number of

participants to a smaller sample size of six in order to complete the study within the succinct timeline.

Moreover, the data utilized in this study are the lived experiences of six men of color and their stories captured in phenomenological interviews. Sometimes participants may feel the need to provide socially desirable responses. The lived experiences were self-reported accounts that could not be completely verified; hence this is another limitation. Four of the six men self selected the four influential leaders that I interviewed. This layer of investigation of interviews assisted with the crystallization process. However, there are some limitations in that they selected the person of influence that I would have access to, and two participants opted at the end, not to put me in contact with anyone at all.

Finally, as the student investigator, I brought my own bias to the research. There is always the danger of finding what you're looking for instead of discovering what is actually there. In order to limit this impending potential bias, I asked all participants to review the data analysis for accuracy and completion.

## **Conclusion**

I honor the six men who afforded me the opportunity to listen and learn from their lived experiences. They revisited memories of joy, pain, triumph, and disappointment. They reflected and shared lessons learned. Each man detailed the nature of their lived experiences and created a vivid picture of those who championed their success within the context of home, community, and school. Furthermore, I honor the commitment of those who serve as their champions. I am grateful for the opportunity to interview the four influential leaders, all of whom were men, who found themselves under the watchful and impressive eye of these six men: Danny's father, Joshua Albert's father, William Grant's college football coach, and Joshua Albert's high school prin-

cipal. They provided me a glimpse into the layers of love, structure, and support that enabled these men the ability to soar. As educational leaders, when we heed the lessons that can be learned from the lives of these four men's stories, we too can serve as champions of justice. Their stories have provided us the opportunity to construct a template for justice annihilating excuses as to why boys of color can't succeed.

As I conclude, I again reflect on King's (1994) prophetic warning as he sat imprisoned in body, *but not in mind*, in a Birmingham jail: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly" (pp. 2-3). Let us be reminded that our decision to champion justice, *or not*, affects us all. All of our children deserve *Justice . . . Just, Justice!* Leaders, let us choose justice!

Championing equity and justice,

*Dionne Verniece Cowan*

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Recruitment Letter

Date

Greetings,

I am writing to tell you about a study entitled, *Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*, being conducted by Dionne Cowan, a colleague of mine. She is a doctoral student at Georgia State University.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experience of six men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline. You may be eligible for this study if you meet the following criteria:

- ✦ Male of African or Latino descent
- ✦ Age 18-41
- ✦ High school graduate having attended a public middle and/or high school
- ✦ No involvement with the juvenile justice system and no jail time

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please contact my colleague, Dionne Cowan, at [dcowan1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:dcowan1@student.gsu.edu). It is important to know that this letter is not to tell you to join the study. It is your decision; your participation in this study is voluntary. Whether or not you participate in this study will have no effect on our relationship. Please do not feel obligated to respond to this email if you are not interested in the study. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

**Appendix B****Participant Eligibility Form**

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Do you consider yourself a male of African descent?
  - Yes
  - No
  
3. Do you consider yourself a male of Latino descent?
  - Yes
  - No
  
4. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Did you earn a high school diploma?
  - Yes
  - No, earned a GED
  - No
  
6. What type of middle or junior high school did you attend?
  - Public school
  - Private school
  - Home school
  
7. What type of high school did you attend?
  - Public school
  - Private school
  - Home school
  
8. Have you ever had any involvement, *defined as caught and/or convicted* (not handcuffed, pulled over, or detained by law enforcement) with the juvenile justice system?
  - Yes
  - No
  
9. Have you ever served any time in jail or an adult prison?
  - Yes
  - No

## Appendix C

### Influential Leader Recruitment Flyer

Thank you for expressing an interest in my dissertation research entitled: *Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*. I value your contribution to the study. I am asking you to participate in this study because a man identified you as a positive influence in their life.

Through your participation, I hope to understand the lived experience of men who evaded the school to prison pipeline. Please contact me, Dionne Cowan, at [dcowan1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:dcowan1@student.gsu.edu). I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Thank you,

*Dionne V. Cowan*

**EMAIL:** [dcowan1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:dcowan1@student.gsu.edu)

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form for the Men of Color

Georgia State University  
Department of Educational Policy Studies

Title:

*Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline:  
A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*

Principal Investigator: Janice Fournillier, Ph. D.  
Student Investigator: Dionne V. Cowan

#### I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate the lived experience of men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline. You are invited to participate because you are man of color who, against many odds, evaded the school to prison pipeline. A total of twelve participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require approximately four-six hours of your time, from July 2015 – April 2016. This participation includes you reviewing the transcripts of the three interviews to check them for accuracy.

#### II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will serve as a participant and as a member of this research study. You will participate in three rounds of interviews conducted by the Student Investigator. It is estimated that each interview will last 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will take place in a natural setting that is most comfortable to you, either in your home or at your workplace. Each interview will be audio recorded. You will be asked to contact a person who served as an influential leader in your life who helped you graduate from high school and evade prison. The purpose of this contact is to see if they would be willing to participate in one 60-90 minute interview with the Student Investigator.

III. Risks: In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits: Participation in this study may or may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about your ability to evade the school to prison pipeline, your resilience along your journey, and leader(s) within your home, community, and school that helped you navigate a successful school experience.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. However, if you drop out of the study, the information used before the drop out date may be included in the research findings.

VI. Confidentiality: We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Dr.

Janice Fournillier, principal investigator, and Dionne Cowan, student investigator, will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). We will use a study number rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored with a special password on a firewall protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons: Contact Janice Fournillier, Ph.D. at 404-413-8262 or [jfournillier@gsu.edu](mailto:jfournillier@gsu.edu) if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu) if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject: We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below. In addition, please check and initial next to the circle indicating if you consent to having one influential leader in your life interviewed.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I consent to having one influential leader in my life interviewed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I do not consent to having one influential leader in my life interviewed.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent Form for the Influential Leaders

Georgia State University  
Department of Educational Policy Studies

Title:

*Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline:  
A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*

Principal Investigator: Janice Fournillier, Ph. D.  
Student Investigator: Dionne V. Cowan

I. Purpose: The purpose of the study is to investigate the lived experiences of men of color who evaded the school to prison pipeline. You are invited to participate in this research study. You are invited to participate because you were named as having influence in the life of a man of color who graduated from high school and did not go to prison. A total of twelve people will participate in this study. The study will take place from July 2015 – April 2016.

II. Procedures:

You will participate in one interview conducted by the Student Investigator. The interview will last about 60-90 minutes. Also, you will be asked to review a copy of the interview transcript for accuracy. The interview will focus on your relationship with the man who named you as an influence in his life. It will take place in a location that is comfortable to you. This can be at your home or at your workplace. The interview will be audio recorded.

III. Risks: In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of your life.

IV. Benefits: Participation in this study may or may not benefit you. We hope to obtain information. This information is about how you helped a man of color.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in this study is on a volunteer basis. You do not have to be in this study. If you change your mind, you can drop out at any time. If you drop out of the study, we can use the information before you dropped out.

VI. Confidentiality: We will keep your records private as allowed by law. Dr. Janice Fournillier and Dionne Cowan will have access to the information you share. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). We will use a study number on study records. This way, you cannot be identified. The information you provide will be stored with a special password on a firewall protected computer. Your name and other facts about your identity will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and shared in group form. You will not be individually named.

VII. Contact Persons: You may contact Janice Fournillier, Ph.D. (404-413-8262 or [jfournillier@gsu.edu](mailto:jfournillier@gsu.edu)) with questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call Janice if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu) if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns you have, offer your thoughts, or get information about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject: We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below. Also, if you are willing to be audio recorded, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol

#### *Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*

#### Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of the lives of six men of color and their evasion from the *school to prison pipeline* (STPP). Additionally, the study will investigate to what capacity the leadership in the home, community, and school contributes to the participant's ability to evade the grip of the STPP. Six men of color will be interviewed three times to capture their lived experiences. The duration of the three interviews for the men of color will last between sixty to ninety minutes. Furthermore, a maximum of one leader, or person of influence, who helped the male participant successfully navigate the educational system will also be interviewed. The duration of the influential leader interviews, referred by the men, will last sixty to ninety minutes.

#### Principal Investigator

Janice Fournillier, Ph. D.

#### Student Investigator

Dionne V. Cowan

#### Research Questions

*Central Question:* What is the nature of the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the STPP?

*Sub Question:* What roles do the leadership in the home, community, and school play in the men's successful navigation of the educational system and beyond?

#### Duration of the study

I will send the recruitment letter, Appendix A of the attached prospectus, to begin the recruitment stage after obtaining IRB approval. Target date to send the recruitment letter is July 2015. I will collect data July 2015 through April 2016.

Kvale (1996) detailed, "with the focus of the interview on the experienced meanings of the subjects' life world, phenomenology appears relevant for clarifying the mode of understanding in a qualitative research interview" (p. 53). A phenomenological reduction can be illustrated as " 'bracketing,' [or] an attempt to place the common sense and scientific foreknowledge about the phenomena within parentheses in order to arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomena;" hence, arriving at a "critical analysis of one's own presuppositions" (Kvale, 1996, p. 54)

#### Reference

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## **Interview Guide with Male of Color who Evaded the School to Prison Pipeline**

### **Organization of the Interview Guide**

This interview guide will address the research questions through specific categories. These categories will be covered in a manner that allows for a natural flow in conversation and open-ended questions. All categories will not be covered in a single interview; however, all categories will be addressed over the duration of the three scheduled interviews.

### **Instructions**

Greetings. My name is Dionne Cowan, and thank you again for agreeing to serve as a participant for my dissertation research: *Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*. The interview involves three parts. Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of an individual. I am seeking your in-depth descriptions of your experience as a man of color and how you evaded the school to prison pipeline. With your assistance, and the assistance of five other men, I desire to highlight and answer the following questions: *What is the nature of the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the STPP?* and *What roles do the leadership in the home, community, and school play in the men's successful navigation of the educational system and beyond?* I estimate that each interview will take between sixty to ninety minutes.

### **Recording Instructions**

If it's okay with you I will be digitally recording our conversations. The purpose of the recordings is to capture the details while remaining attentive to my conversation with you. Only researchers on the project will be privy to the recordings. I will transcribe the interview; then, I will provide a copy to you for the purpose of verifying the accuracy of the documents.

### ***Begin Digital Recording***

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Consent Form Signed: *Yes or No*

***Interviewee Background – Context of Home***

- Describe your family structure.
  - Family composition
  - Who raised you
- Can you tell me more about home?
  - What was it like to grow up in your home?
    - Comfort at home
    - Pressure
    - Responsibilities
- Did you grow up with other siblings/family members in the home?
  - Only/oldest/youngest/middle
  - Sibling interactions
  - Family member interactions
- What memories do you hold dear?
  - Family traditions and/or vacations
  - Sibling interactions/only child
  - Contrast friends
- Socioeconomic status of family?
  - Low/middle/high
  - Limiting
- Supports
  - Parent(s)/Guardian(s)
  - Other family members

***Interviewee Background – Context of Community***

- Where did you grow up?
  - Describe your city/town.
    - Population/ size
    - Urban/suburban/rural
  - What was it like to grow up in your town?
    - Safe/ unsafe
    - Risks/ benefits
- Did you experience racial profiling in the community?
  - First hand experience and/or observation of another
  - Reaction
    - Emotions
- What type(s) of community supports were made available to you?
  - Church
  - After school programs
  - Mentoring
  - Team sports
  - Other opportunities
  - Summer camps and/or summer jobs
  - Internship opportunities

***Interviewee Background – Context of School***

- Describe your elementary school experience.
  - What do you remember being of value to you at this age?
  - What were your dreams for/thoughts about high school? After high school?
  - Did you have regular attendance at school?
- Describe your middle school/junior high experience.
  - Did you attend the feeder school of your elementary school?
  - If not, why did you to move?
  - Who were the people that influenced you the most?
  - What do you remember being of value to you at this age?
  - What were your dreams for/thoughts about high school? After high school?
  - Did you have regular attendance at school?
- Describe your high school experience.
  - Did you attend the feeder school of your middle/junior high school?
  - If not, why did you move?
  - Who were the people that influenced you the most?
  - What do you remember being of value to you at this age?
  - What were your dreams for/thoughts about graduating from high school?
  - What were your plans for after high school?
  - Did you have regular attendance at school?
- Describe your academic pursuits (including academic ranking).
  - Elementary school
  - Middle school
  - High school
  - Favorite subject
    - Why?
  - Least favorite subject
    - Why?
- Discipline at school
  - School contact with parent(s)/guardian(s)
  - Detentions
  - In school suspensions
  - Out of school suspensions
  - Males versus females
  - How would you define the school to prison pipeline?
- Describe your relationships at school
  - With peers
    - Social
    - Introvert/extravert
    - Friends
  - With administrators
  - With teachers and/or coaches
    - Favorite and least favorite
      - why?
    - Classroom management
  - With community representatives

- Mentors
- Volunteers
- Church groups/ non-profit organizations
- Others
- Treatment of males versus females in school
  - Treatment of males
    - By teachers
    - By administrators
  - Treatment of females
    - By teachers
    - By administrators
- Would you have described yourself as more of a leader or a follower?
  - Tell me about a time when you were a leader? What made you lead? Why do you believe you were a leader in that situation?
  - Tell me about a time when you were a follower? What made you follow? Why do you believe you were a follower in that situation?
- Describe your involvement in co-curricular and/or extra curricular activities.
  - Clubs
  - Sports
  - Others

### ***Leadership – Context of Home***

- Who was the leader in the home
  - Vocal leader
  - Silent leader
- Describe leadership in your home
  - Impact
  - Direction

### ***Leadership – Context of Community***

- Were there leaders in your community?
  - How would you describe those leaders
    - Adults
    - Peers
    - Coaches
    - Mentors
- Did you interact with community leaders
  - In what capacity did the leaders interact with you?
  - In what capacity did you interact with the leaders?

### ***Leadership – Context of School***

- Who was your principal?
  - Describe your principal.
    - Likes
    - Dislikes
    - Effective/Ineffective leader

- Describe the duties of your principal.
  - Handle discipline
    - ✓ Zero tolerance policy
- Describe the climate of your school.
  - Was the climate of the school affected by the principal?
- Did principal work with anyone outside of the school to build school community?
  - Community members
  - Parents
  - Businesses/ organizations/ churches/faith based organizations
- Who were the members of the administrative team?
  - Describe the members of the administrative team.
    - Likes
    - Dislikes
    - Effective/Ineffective administrative team
  - Describe the duties of the administrative team.
    - Handle discipline
      - ✓ Zero tolerance policy
  - Describe the climate of your school.
    - Did the administrative team have an impact on the climate of the school?
- Who were the teachers/staff members you remember the most?
  - Describe the teachers/counselors.
    - Why are they so memorable?
    - Would you describe them as leaders?
    - How did they help you?
    - Did/do you still communicate with them after high school graduation?
    - Do you still communicate with them now?
- How do you define leadership in schools?
  - Describe effective leadership in schools.
    - How did you know you were in the presence of an effective leader?
  - Are you able to name a leader in a school who was an effective leader?
    - If not, what are schools missing in this area?
    - If yes, how did you know you were in the presence of an effective leader?

Conclusion of Interview:

Documents/ Artifacts Obtained:

Student PI will share the Influential Leader Recruitment Flyer:

Is there anything that I haven't asked that you'd like to share with me?

Has anything come to mind since our last interview that you wanted to share with me?

Post Interview Comments:

## Interview Guide with the Influential Leader

### Organization of the Interview Guide

This interview guide will address the research questions through specific categories. These categories will be covered in a manner that allows for a natural flow in conversation and open-ended questions. All categories will be covered in a single interview.

### Instructions

Greetings. My name is Dionne Cowan, and thank you again for agreeing to serve as a participant for my dissertation research: *Men of Color Evading the School to Prison Pipeline: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Resilience*. Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of an individual. I am seeking your in-depth descriptions of your experience in leading a man of color as he evaded the school to prison pipeline. With your assistance, and the assistance of six men, I desire to highlight and answer the following questions: *What is the nature of the lived experiences of six men of color who evaded the STPP?* and *What roles do the leadership in the home, community, and school play in the men's successful navigation of the educational system and beyond?* I estimate that today's interview will take between forty to sixty minutes.

### Recording Instructions

If it's okay with you I will be digitally recording our conversations. The purpose of the recordings is to capture the details while remaining attentive to my conversation with you. Only researchers on the project will be privy to the recordings. I will transcribe the interview; then, I will provide a copy to you for the purpose of verifying the accuracy of the documents.

### *Begin Digital Recording*

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Consent Form Signed: *Yes or No*

***Influential Leader Questions***

- How did you meet?
  - Nature of the relationship (at first meeting/now)
- Strengths versus Opportunities to Grow
  - Describe their strengths
  - Describe their opportunities to grow
- Leader versus Follower
  - Would you describe him as more of a leader or a follower?
  - Did you see changes in this area over the duration of your relationship?
- How was he supported?
  - Home
  - Community
  - School
- How would you define the school to prison pipeline?
- Did you see a promising future for him?
- Impact
  - Do you feel you impacted his life?
    - If so, in what way(s)?
  - Did he impact your life?
    - If so, in what way(s)?
- Describe the characteristics of an influential leader.

**Conclusion of Interview:**

Documents/Artifacts Obtained:

Is there anything that I haven't asked that you'd like to share with me?

Post Interview Comments:

## Appendix G

Data Collection Chart

Interview #	Pseudonym	Date	Number of Minutes	Number of Pages Transcribed
1	Grant	8/31/15 2:30 PM	46:18	12 pages
2	Grant	9/14/15 12:30 PM	46:19	13 pages
3	Grant	12/9/15 3:15 PM	11:25	3 pages
TOTAL			1:44:02	28 pages
Leader	Not applicable		----	----
1	Albert	9/3/15 5:00 PM	51:41	14 pages
2	Albert	9/10/15 10:00 AM	48:58	13 pages
3	Albert	9/14/15 11:00 AM	28:27	7 pages
TOTAL			2:09:06	34 pages
Leader	Albert's principal	10/6/15 2:30 PM	37:11	8 pages
1	Danny	9/15/15 11:30 AM	53:53	14 pages
2	Danny	9/21/15 11:30 AM	42:46	9 pages
3	Danny	10/13/15 11:20 AM	33:13	6 pages
TOTAL			2:09:52	29 pages
Leader	Danny's father	12/10/15 3:30 PM	32:38	6 pages
1	Kingston	9/16/15 9:30 AM	44:49	14 pages
2	Kingston	9/25/15 3:00 PM	28:56	7 pages
3	Kingston	10/14/15 9:30 AM	18:10	5 pages
TOTAL			1:31:55	26 pages
Leader	Not applicable		----	----
1	William	9/21/15 4:00 PM	50:09	13 pages
2	William	10/8/15 4:30 PM	36:07	10 pages
3	William	10/12/15 10:00 AM	45:35	10 pages
TOTAL			2:11:51	33 pages

<b>Interview #</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Number of Minutes</b>	<b>Number of Pages Transcribed</b>
Leader	William's coach	11/11/15 3:30PM	29:49	6 pages
1	Joshua	10/2/15 9:00 AM	49:20	10 pages
2	Joshua	10/9/15 10:00 AM	82:14	17 pages
3	Joshua	11/6/15 9:00 AM	36:25	8 pages
TOTAL			2:47:59	35 pages
Leader	Joshua's father	11/17/15 2:30 PM	34:17	6 pages
Total (6 male participants)			12:34:45	185 pages*
Total (4 leader participants)			2:13:55	26 pages*
Combined Totals			14:48:40	211 pages*

\*all page references are single spaced

**Appendix G****Thank You Letter to Participants****DIONNE V. COWAN**

Date

Greetings \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for meeting with me over the course of the past few months and sharing your experience. I am appreciative of your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings, events and situations as you've lived to share how you evaded the school to prison pipeline (STPP).

I have enclosed a transcript of your interview(s). Will you please review the documents? Be sure to ask yourself if this interview has fully captured your experience as to how you escaped the grip of the STPP. After careful review of the interview transcripts, you may realize that an important experience was neglected. Please feel free to add comments, with the enclosed red pen, that would further elaborate your experience(s), or if you prefer we can arrange to meet again and record your additions or corrections. Please do not edit for grammatical corrections. The way you shared your story is the most critical.

Once you have reviewed the transcript and completed any necessary revisions, please return the transcript in the stamped, addressed envelope.

Once more, I value and am honored by your participation and thank you for the commitment and investment of your time, energy, and effort. If you have any questions and/or concerns, I can be reached at [dcowan1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:dcowan1@student.gsu.edu).

Crafting solutions,

Dionne V. Cowan

**EMAIL:** [dcowan1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:dcowan1@student.gsu.edu)