IN SCHOOL WE TRUST: THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF A
SUBGROUP OF BOYS OF COLOR AT A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my sons, Evrol and Gary, the two biggest accomplishments of my life. It is through God’s grace and favor that I was able to complete this chapter of my life with both of you by my side. Your fortitude, independence, and commitment to scholarship are a constant reminder of the supernatural power that is within each of us. You inspire me to be my best, and encourage me to keep climbing despite the odds and obstacles that may litter my path. It is because of you that I am compelled to continue to reinvent myself time and again, for there is nothing that we cannot do, together.

Onward and upward.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for my family and friends who have all played a role in helping me climb to the top of this mountain. I have learned so much from you and about myself throughout this process, and I am eternally grateful for the vote of confidence and helping hands along the way. For the countless vanilla chai tea lattes, timely hugs, critical pushes, empathetic ears, and tough words of encouragement, I sincerely thank you.

I would also like to thank Dr. Eva Gold, my chair, for her relentless guidance and support. Her thought-provoking feedback, questions, and comments were all critical in helping me achieve my goal. And, a big thank to my other committee members, Dr. Will Jordan, Dr. Leslie Nabors Olah, and Dr. Michael Nakkula, for their feedback, encouragement, and advice throughout this work that challenged my thinking and expanded my perspectives.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the Boston Public Schools for allowing me to gain a deeper understanding of my school through this study, and to sharpen my leadership skills through a learner’s lens. I would be remiss if I did not extend one final thank you to Drs. Darius and Kathleen who have always believed in me and this work.
ABSTRACT

IN SCHOOL WE TRUST: THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF A SUBGROUP OF BOYS OF COLOR AT A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

Renee K. McCall

S. Eva Gold

This phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of a subgroup of boys of color at a public high school in Boston using an action research lens. The student participants were all 10th graders between the ages of 15 to 18 years who attended the school under study for at least one year, hailed from multiple neighborhoods across the city, and had varying academic statuses, including regular and special education. This study centers on the role that relational trust plays in how these male students of color experience daily social and academic interactions with teachers, and the resulting impacts these interactions have on students’ perspectives of the overall school climate and community. The role that relational trust plays in this setting and its connections to and across the three domains of academic press, sense of belonging, and stereotype threat are studied. The underlying issues related to students’ racial identities, perceptions of academic expectations held by teachers and resultant performance, and emotional investments grounded in relational trust are examined. At the center of instructional, social, and relational interactions between teachers and students is trust that can either produce or inhibit achievement, and is the cohesive glue that allows for a shift in the mindsets of teachers and students from merely complying with policies, procedures, and initiatives to fully committing to them with optimism and consistency.
Student participants self-selected into the study based on their interests, and possess a commitment to informing and improving conditions for learning at this school for all students. Each student participant is interested in matriculating to college upon graduation from high school and strives to capitalize on school-based opportunities that expand their perspectives on matters impacting society. Data for the study were obtained through focus groups facilitated by an independent researcher, via district school climate and culture surveys, and through leadership reflective journal entries and observations. This study presents a more nuanced take on existing literature that relates to the perspectives of students of color on school climate and culture by adding an emphasis on understanding the role of relational trust on those perspectives.
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In an effort to eliminate deficit language, mislabeling, and misconceptions about Black men as lacking in moral fiber or intelligence (Givens, Nasir, Ross, & De Royston, 2016), a narrative that emphasizes the positive academic and social outcomes of this group must be placed at the forefront of the discourse on pedagogy. Narrow perspectives about Black men, such as anti-school and threatening, need to be examined to disrupt deep-seated stereotypes. It is critical that notions of Black manhood are reimagined that focus on the positive contributions they make to society and their families. The prevailing belief is that deficit-based thinking has pushed policymakers, educators and, in many ways, Black males themselves into believing their deficits are too significant to overcome and, most importantly, that the criticism is accurate (Rhoden, 2017). Givens et al. (2016) posit that Black males’ sense of self and racial identities are constructed in relation to stereotypes. As such, the pervasive, monolithic perspectives held by the dominant society have profound implications on the self-view and educational outcomes of Black males.

Systemic challenges exasperate societal racial and gender disparities that fuel the underperformance in school of Black boys, resulting in the fact that only 47% of Black boys graduated on time from high schools in the United States in 2008, compared to 78% of White boys (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). It is critically important that school leadership hone in on the specific needs of this group in order to help improve school conditions and remove barriers to success. Harper and Quaye (2009) posit that students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than their disengaged peers to
persist through to graduation. Therefore, offerings in the community must be geared
toward the interests of boys of color to affirm their cultures and increase their investment
in school experiences. School improvement efforts that focus on diminishing opportunity
gaps will strengthen the identities of Black boys, as well as their sense of belonging in the
school community. According to Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D’Alessandro
(2013), race/ethnicity is an important predictor in explaining perceptions of school
climate. As such, the lived experiences of boys of color in the school environment is
important to understand in order to improve their four-year high school journeys. A
strengthened sense of identity and belonging have the potential to improve engagement
and motivation for this historically underserved group (Byrd & Chavous, 2009).

My study is based on the lived experiences of a subgroup of boys of color who
recently completed their freshman year at a turnaround high school in Boston, named
‘Central High School’ in this study. Generally speaking, high school transitions can be
moments of peril (Neild, 2009) for many students, both academically and socially,
therefore, my focus is on understanding how our community proactively addresses and
manages the concerns and uncertainties of students coming from various backgrounds
and school settings, converging into a new culture. For example, the Consortium on
Chicago School Research found that grades declined between 8th grade and 9th grade for
high- and low-achieving students in high-performing and low-performing schools for
every demographic group, including boys and girls of all races and ethnicities (Easton,
Johnson, & Sartain, 2017). The average freshman’s unweighted GPA is below a C. Data
at the school level can demonstrate habits and behaviors that could affect 4-year expected
graduation. Thus, the process of soliciting and collecting ongoing student perception data
is important to establish and analyze in order to implement intentional, proactive interventions that are geared toward improving the school’s graduation rate.

As the principal of Central High School in its first year of turnaround, I noticed that a large percentage of boys of color in ninth grade exhibit behaviors that may indicate a lack of connectedness to the school community, including:

- earning a D or F in at least one core class,
- subpar attendance rates, and
- higher disciplinary hearings versus other racial groups.

Therefore, as part of this study, actionable steps, including interventions and initiatives with the goal of improving outcomes for boys of color specifically, and the broader school community, overall, were developed based on stories gathered directly from students themselves. As such, the aim of my study is focused on investigating the role that trust plays at Central High School, which, when strong, could bring about improvement not only for this group of boys of color but for all students in the community. Without trust among administrators, teachers, and students, the ability to collaborate, take risks, and remain open to new ideas could stymie progress. Based on my commitment to the advancement of all students, particularly boys of color, as well as my fervent drive to create conditions where all students are valued and thrive, this study is the first step in the development of opportunities for students to share their perspectives and have their voices incorporated into the decision-making process at their school. My study, therefore, is grounded in the following research questions.
Research Questions

- How do boys of color experience daily social and academic interactions with teachers?
- What attitudes do these students possess about their school’s climate and culture?
  - How do students’ beliefs about their relationships with teachers affect their connections to school?
- What is the relationship, if any, between relational trust and boys’ of color perceptions of school?

Relational trust has not been deeply explored among Black boys, even though, it is important to the school-student relationship and helps students achieve their academic goals (Rhoden, 2017). Through my study, firsthand accounts of factors that contribute to or obstruct the development of trust between Black and Latino boys and their teachers have been gathered. My aim was to obtain data in order to engage in conversation centered on developing school-based practices that could help close the existing opportunity gap. In addition, I sought to pinpoint solutions in order to empower boys of color to embrace education as the truest form of freedom, a passage to independence, and social and economic mobility.

Significance and Rationale

George Washington Carver stated that education is the key to unlock the golden door to freedom, and I believe that it also influences the trajectory of an individual’s life. With an educated citizenry, democracy can continue to exist and flourish, and more informed decisions can be made to benefit and further human existence. As cited in
Ozumba and John (2017), W.E.B. DuBois believed that persistent agitation, political action, and academic education would be the means to achieve full citizenship rights for Blacks. DuBois believed that Blacks should not have to sacrifice their constitutional rights in order to achieve a status that was already guaranteed (Ozumba & John, 2017), and that an educated citizenry can work collaboratively toward a remedy that improves circumstances and outcomes for all, regardless of race.

The central belief that everyone has the right to succeed despite who you are or where you come from is aligned with my commitment to helping to close the opportunity gap that persists between Black and White students at my school site, as well as across the district. I am compelled to lead with both a moral and human obligation in mind that ensures that every student, regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or gender, has the chance to reach their fullest potential and possesses the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve success in college, career, and life. I strive to instill in students that, as an educated populace, it is critical to reject and/or overcome learned helplessness and to subvert, rather than reinforce, perpetuate, or confirm negative stereotypes. The misinformed, dominant view and the imbalanced systems that keep subgroups of students down and elevate others must be recalibrated. And, schools have the potential to do just that by bettering students’ lives through fostering learning experiences that affirm their individuality, cultures, backgrounds, and ideas.

Delpit (2006) reinforced the importance for all teachers who work with students of color to more fully gain an insight into the lives, cultures, and backgrounds of their students in an effort to more holistically educate them. Well-intentioned teachers believe
they act in the best interest of their students by making choices related to classroom activity design, curriculum use, selection of discussion topics, and the like, however, these decisions may narrow students’ perspectives and limit their knowledge base.

Teachers and other staff may look upon the students of color they serve as “damaged and dangerous caricatures” (Delpit, 2006, p. xiii) who are ill-equipped to meet academic standards. This fog, or the interplay of one’s bias and ignorance, influences teachers’ interactions with students of color and perpetuates stereotypes about this group’s capabilities. Therefore, assumptions are made about a group of students based on their race, sex, and class due to teachers’ biased perspectives that need broadening in order to more adequately relate to, affirm, and sustain students’ cultures.

Delpit (2006) points out that worldviews of those with power and privilege are taken as reality, while the ideas, plights, and lives of those who do not possess that same power are insignificant. This dominant narrative is the standard that determines how the world operates and poses a problem for many whose voices are never heard or considered because they lack the proverbial seat at the table. On the other hand, however, to institute a schooling system that merely teaches middle-class values and aspirations further continues the power structure that exists—more business as usual. As such, teachers and administrators want more for students, and that needs to be co-constructed by all stakeholders with or without perceived power to benefit a society where all have access to opportunities that lead to success.

Hernik and Shamsudheen (2017) posit that learning is a social act that requires a collaborative component to help students internalize what they have learned. Therefore,
the act of teaching must allow faculty the freedom to deviate from the curriculum in order to incorporate culturally and linguistically sustaining practices into their lessons. The depth of the relationship that a teacher has with students impacts the effectiveness of their teaching (Downey, 2008). Teaching and learning experiences should be a convergence of ideas between teacher and student, as well as between student and student. Based on the theory of constructivism learning (Fosnot, 1996), the production of knowledge in the classroom must extend beyond the notion that the teacher is the sole producer of said knowledge and embrace the idea that students are also experts on certain topics, and are not simply passive consumers. It is a give-and-take, a sharing, not a depositing of knowledge. Educators need to learn as much as they can about their students: who they are, what they value and believe, and what they hope for and desire (Nieto, 2012).

It is critical that teachers deliver lessons that put concepts in context so that students can extract meaning from the tasks they engage in and more readily apply that knowledge to their lives. The act of expanding perspectives of teachers is critical to mitigating the perpetuation of the status quo, and to encouraging dedication to openness and acceptance of differences that dispel preconceived notions about students of color. Maintaining a limited viewpoint creates barriers to seeing others’ perspectives, which can ultimately increase the power differential and continue stereotypes. Differences in cultural norms, literacies, and language should not equate to inferiority, and an integral role of teachers is to communicate that gaining fluency in the mode of the dominant discourse does not require abandoning students own identities in the process.
Based on my experience and observations, a teacher-student relationship that exhibits mutual trust and respect allows these kinds of learning experiences to occur with a constant push-and-pull during daily interactions and exchanges. Teachers maintain high expectations for their students and students perform to the best of their abilities; thus both parties experience growth and progress, elevating their practice and understanding to higher levels.

A key section of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I - Financial Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for the Education of Children of Low-Income Families, is appropriated to the education system to aid in the prevention of high school dropout and improve conditions of schools that increase students’ opportunities to gain social and economic mobility. The reauthorization of this act has led to multiple school reform efforts across the nation that have been well-intentioned, and it has been the catalyst to bring about effective and sustained school change that may have implications on student outcomes. In an effort to enhance the quality of instruction, resources, capital, and otherwise in schools, reformers have sought input from many stakeholders. This has led to replicable change in some schools, but not in others.

This study is of importance because it will provide new insight for faculty and staff at Central High School, as well as for other teachers and school leaders who serve in urban schools, and other constituents who perceive interactions and experiences with students through a limited lens. Findings will provide these constituents with a counternarrative that could potentially compel them to approach social situations differently and to create academic experiences that allow for academic risk-taking.
leading to improved achievement. The concept of social capital, as defined by Coleman (1988), describes the complex and variegated social mechanisms that parents garner to advance their children’s chances of success. Thus, the interconnectedness between social capital, relational trust, and teaching that affirms students’ cultures can expand teachers’ views on their interactions with students and the impact they have on students’ trajectory of success.

Data and findings obtained through this study could also contribute to further research that emphasizes the process of cultivating trust between teachers and a diverse student body, including boys of color, to better understand the perceptions they have of their schools and the level of connectedness they experience. The foundational purpose of education is to prepare students to compete on a global scale through the development of creative problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Yet, according to Bryk and Schneider (2003), schools serve important political, civic, and moral purposes, as well. My study will help me better understand how boys of color at Central High School view their connectedness to the school community as they strive to make meaning of their experiences and their impact on the world around them. At the core of my study is the authenticity of students’ perceptions of their school’s climate and culture and relationships of trust with teachers that may impact their ability to engage with learning experiences that lead to success.

With positive learning conditions, students can feel supported to grapple with relevant real-world problems and work collaboratively to continuously refine ideas and beliefs that are more developed, integrating multiple perspectives (Wilson & Peterson,
1996). Students and teachers can be expected to develop knowledge through inquiry, discovery, and creativity when they embody agency over learning and commit to continuous reflection, feedback, and growth to effect change for themselves, their school, and the broader community. According to Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015), trust may be a mediating variable for other factors associated with student achievement, such as academic press and collective teacher efficacy. This could create conditions in the school that spark innovation across classrooms, facilitate open dialogue amongst teachers to more effectively problem-solve, and undergird organizational norms of continuous improvement and collaboration. With a positive social climate and culture, an emphasis on trust can be understood, built, and sustained to establish conditions to consistently meet the needs of our most marginalized student populations.

This study is focused on identifying and understanding the complexity of trust, relationships, and climate and culture through social/emotional experiences and interactions as experienced by boys of color. In addition, I aimed to understand the manner in which these boys define and experience the social climate at Central High School, as well as the role that relational trust plays in their attitudes and in shaping conditions for academic achievement. The four elements of relational trust, included in this study, that impact students’ perspectives on relationships with teachers, administrators, and their peers and lead to a collective sense of engagement are: respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

I designed this study to explore the significance of relational trust in the academic experience of boys of color through the lens of a subgroup of students. According to Lee
(1995), many Black males experience major challenges, often become frustrated, lose hope, and ultimately, drop out or are pushed out of school. The data I gathered through my study will be used to disrupt these circumstances and improve outcomes for this marginalized group of students. The consequences of this situation have generally created significant limitations on students’ socioeconomic mobility, leading to high rates of unemployment, crime, and incarceration for growing numbers of young African American males (Lee, 1995). My study focuses on boys of color consisting of Blacks and Latinos with the hope that it can provide a window into a broader societal issue and lead to urban educational policies and interventions that have the potential to improve this group’s academic, economic, and political outcomes and, perhaps, that of other students as well.

**Background and Context**

Central High School has experienced multiple organizational and structural iterations over the past couple of decades, including the disaggregation of a large comprehensive high school into several smaller high schools. Within the past seven years, the smaller schools merged into one medium-sized comprehensive high school, known as Central High School. The school experienced significant racial turmoil in the 1970s when schools in Boston were mandated by a court order to desegregate, placing the school and the neighboring community at the center of racial intolerance and hate, as a result. Students from a neighboring predominantly Black, inner-city community were forced to attend school at what was a predominantly White school at the time. The position of the neighborhood and values of its residents were racially hostile and intolerant. While racial tension at this school and in the community was a common
occurrence over 40 years ago, today, the school’s demographic is predominantly comprised of students of color with less than 10% of the student population classified as White. During the 2017-18 school year, the student body consisted of approximately 540 students, 39% of whom were classified as African American, 29% of whom identified as Latino, approximately 23% classified as Asian, with the remainder, about 9%, classified as White. While the demographic of the teaching staff at Central has become more diverse, a mismatch continues to persist between teacher and student economic, social, and racial backgrounds. Fifty percent of the faculty do not represent the racial backgrounds of our student population, with White teachers being overrepresented, and Black and especially Latino teachers underrepresented. The most recent breakdown of teacher and guidance counselor racial backgrounds are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the leader of this school, I am charged with ensuring that a safe and welcoming environment exists for both staff and students alike. I was fortunate enough to fully interview and hire the entire teaching staff at the school and, while our school is an open enrollment public school, students are assigned to the school each year based on family choice and other factors. My goals for school improvement have been centered around strategies to improve the climate and culture of the school, as well as to improve teaching and learning as a whole. The school was deemed underperforming by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and placed in turnaround status in October 2016 due to a lack of substantial improvement in several metrics among multiple subgroups of students, over the past five or more years. The turnaround plan was
developed by school leadership in conjunction with the district’s central office based on four turnaround practices outlined by the state. The turnaround practices consist of:

1. Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration
2. Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction
3. Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students
4. School Climate and Culture

Although the turnaround status is deemed a negative label by many students, teachers, and parents, the 2017-18 school year was framed with the status as an opportunity to redefine the high school teaching and learning experience to one that is relevant, engaging, and welcoming to all students.

Each year, students are administered an annual school climate and culture district survey to measure various elements of their learning environment. In general, the more engaged students are more likely to be the ones who respond to surveys, and as a result, survey responses are likely to be skewed toward that group. Upon review of school-level data from the 2016-17 school year, 44% of the student body responded to the annual online climate survey that measured six climate indicators as noted in Figure 1 below: Sense of belonging; Emotional safety; Teacher interest in students; Academic challenge; Physical safety; and Valuing of learning. Although more than half of the student population did not respond to the survey, it is evident from the responses that at least for those that did respond, the emotional and physical safety indicators were rated on par with ratings from other district respondents, both at 3.7 on a 5.0 scale. However, the
sense of belonging and value of learning indicators, both at 3.3, show the biggest difference from the overall district respondents’ ratings.

Student respondents from Central did not highly rate the connection of content learned in classes to their lives, illuminating the fact that relevance and connectedness appeared to be an issue from the perspectives of student respondents during that academic year. This information may further suggest that students do not readily identify with their school environment, nor possess positive perceptions of what they learn in school.

Figure 1. 2016-17 Student Climate Survey.
Figure 1, above, shows the school’s student rating against the district’s rating for six selected survey components from the district’s 2016-17 student climate survey. A lever to increase engagement among students that could lead to an increased interest in content would be to improve teachers’ interest in students, which was rated at 3.4. That rating might be indicative of students’ lack of trust or of meaningful, working relationships with teachers. Information gleaned from the Teacher interest in students indicator from the student climate survey graph above is pertinent to my study. The fact that, on average, the majority of students who responded to the survey agree that teachers are interested in what they do outside of the classroom demonstrates that conditions exist for a trusting relationship to develop between teachers and students, which could lead to a strong sense of belonging and increased academic achievement.

Data from the school’s Monitoring Site Visit, measured in part, using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool, were also analyzed. CLASS was developed to measure teachers’ ability to connect with students, both socially and instructionally, and predict students’ performance growth. It takes into consideration four domains that rate classroom interactions between teachers and students. Based on a research brief out of the University of Virginia, CLASS is the only observational teacher-assessment tool that captures teacher behaviors linked to student gains that has been proven to work in tens of thousands of classrooms, including high school classrooms. Research using the CLASS on the secondary level has shown that the following criteria were all associated with higher relative student gains in achievement:

- Teachers’ skills in establishing a positive emotional climate,
● Teachers’ sensitivity to student needs,
● Teachers’ structuring of their classroom and lessons in ways that recognize adolescents’ needs for a sense of autonomy and control,
● An active role in their learning, and
● Opportunities for peer interaction (Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2008).

The domains in the CLASS tool consist of various dimensions that provide teachers with feedback and data in order to improve their social and instructional interactions with students in ways that could lead to student growth and a more productive and favorable learning environment:

1. Emotional Support - positive climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for adolescent perspectives;
2. Classroom Organization - behavior management, productivity, and negative climate;
3. Instructional Support - instructional learning formats, content understanding, analysis and inquiry, quality of feedback, and instructional dialogue; and
4. Student Engagement.

The most recent Monitoring Site Visit conducted at the study site was subcontracted to the American Institute for Research (AIR) by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and used the CLASS tool. The initial site visit was conducted shortly after the school was placed in turnaround status, and its purpose was to gain an understanding of the instructional climate and relationships between teachers and
students across the building. The domain averages in bold in Figure 2 below take into account performance on each underlying dimension in the four categories. Summary findings are noted in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Low Range</th>
<th>Middle Range</th>
<th>High Range</th>
<th>Average Scores*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support Domain</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Climate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Sensitivity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regard for Student Perspectives</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Organization Domain</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Management</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Climate**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Support Domain</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Learning Formats</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Understanding</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Inquiry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Dialogue</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. Summary MSV Findings from 2016-17 School Year.

As noted, the rating scale ranges from 1 to 7, and the instructional support domain was the lowest ranking at 4.0. An observation worth noting is that the emotional support domain scored in the mid-range, overall. And, while evidence of a positive climate was noted at the school, the Regard for Student Perspectives dimension was rated in the low middle range, which could be an area for improvement that might lead to increased student motivation and engagement. The following two pieces of qualitative data were extracted from the November 2016 Annual Monitoring Site Visit Report provided to
school leadership, as evidence for the score rating received for the Regard for Student Perspectives dimension:

Teachers sometimes make meaningful connections to the daily lives of students, but these are often quick connections that are not discussed. In one classroom, a teacher connects content of the lesson to a popular television show that many of the students watch; another teacher connects a news report to a text that they are about to read; and another teacher asks students if they have ever experienced something similar to what the character in the book was going through. These examples do not happen consistently in all classrooms (Annual Monitoring Site Report, 2016, p. 17).

There are occasional opportunities for student leadership. These are often for small tasks, such as passing out papers or turning off the lights. However, some teachers give students larger leadership opportunities, such as going up to the board and showing the class how they completed the activity (Annual Monitoring Site Report, 2016, p. 17).

These two pieces of data show that inconsistent learning experiences take place, making connections to some students’ lives, but not in others. In addition, students are willing to more fully engage in class to demonstrate their leadership potential, but opportunities are not available across all classes. Data show that while a positive climate might exist in the classroom, student perspectives do not consistently inform teachers’ practice, nor do they add to the developing knowledge in the classroom. Qualitative and quantitative data from the Monitoring Site Visit, along with information from measures of the implementation of turnaround practices at the school, show that trusting relationships between students and some teachers exist, but it is inconsistent across classrooms. While instructional staff survey responses indicate that, on average, the staff at the school agree that relationships between all staff are trusting and non-judgmental, reports from the 2016-17 Monitoring Site Visit interviews and focus groups suggest that not all staff share this viewpoint, thus, this is a key area for growth.
Student perspectives at Central High School, collected in this study, aim to provide deeper insight into how the above data reflect the experience of a particular population—boys of color—and whether or not this population views and values trust and relationships with their teachers, and how they view the overall school climate, both of which are foundational conditions for their academic achievement. Data analyzed from the various sources above were triangulated with findings from focus groups, district climate surveys (see Appendix A), observations, and leadership notes.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The remaining sections of my study consist of the literature review, followed by the methodology, data findings, and a discussion. The literature review outlines the main bodies of research related to social capital, relational trust, and school climate and culture, and weaves together an argument about the implications that the aforementioned themes have on perceptions that boys of color in this study have on the school community. Important underlying issues surfaced during the data collection stage that center on perceived and potential threats to student and staff race and other identities. These subthemes were analyzed to better understand their impact on the manner in which student participants see themselves as contributing and valued members of the school community.

The section on data findings detail a synthesis of multiple sources of information from focus groups, annual student climate and culture surveys, journals and observations. Both unique and common experiences, as told by students, are detailed in this section that emphasize solid, existing school-level structures, as well as opportunities for continued
improvement. Finally, the discussion section summarizes my study’s contribution to the field, and outlines implications for school leaders and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The perceptions of boys of color were gathered and analyzed based on three broad lines of literature: social capital, relational trust, and school climate and culture. Three subcategories came to bear on these lines of literature: academic press, sense of belonging, and stereotype threat. These literatures support the argument that social capital helps students navigate through challenges and that relational trust contributes to a positive school climate, allowing for conditions to be created that support academic achievement. The intersection of social capital, relational trust, and school climate and culture can create the perception among students that school is a caring place that affirms their identities, lessens stereotypes threats, and increases their sense of belonging. In an environment such as this, students are more likely to persevere and exhibit academic press and demonstrate positive school behaviors that may lead to strong academic outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, 2013).

The process of building and linking research questions to a conceptual framework is nonlinear and iterative, and helps to better understand the common thread through the literature. The relationship between the questions and framework is helpful for readers and lends credibility and clarity to the research. The development of one leads to a development in the other (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Figure 3, which takes the form of an adaptation of a published concept diagram (Collins, 2018), is a detailed graphic representation of the conceptual framework that provides the theoretical guidance in this study.
In the Chicago Public Schools, many researchers have been dedicated to gathering data to show the elements and combination of change efforts that lead to overall improvement of schools. Payne (2008), a Chicago researcher, posits that trust is foundational to change efforts that lead to school improvement, as evidenced by an analysis of findings generated by the Consortium on Chicago School Research based at the University of Chicago. Relational trust does not directly affect student learning. Rather, trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Bradshaw et al. (2014) suggest three areas of engagement that influence whether or not a safe and supportive school model exists: relationships, respect for diversity, and
school participation. When these characteristics are positive, they can lead to affirming behaviors from teachers to students, increasing students’ agency, constructive behaviors, and confidence.

Mitra (2006) states that students are able to co-create the path of reform through student voice opportunities that engage them in a process of inquiry about the status of reform in their schools. This process helps them to examine feasible solutions to problems alongside adults, which is an important feature of authentic reform. The development of student voices increases their sense of belonging and connectedness to school, thus, allowing relationships to form between teacher and student. The manner in which students view their school environment and the level of trust in relationships with teachers and other adults in the building is foundational to student achievement. Trust in the classroom allows students to feel supported to take academic risks that deepen their understanding of content that informs their decision-making within school and beyond its walls. Meier (1995) posits that building trust is essential to advance the academic mission of any school that prepares students to become productive citizens in a diverse society. Meier’s (1995) contention is in direct alignment with Alvarado’s (1998) premise that respect, trust, and collegial spirit bring about change in and across schools.

According to a study conducted by Bryk and Schneider (2003) of 400 Chicago elementary schools over a six-year period in the 1990s, a broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school’s day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans. These findings demonstrate that as adult trust improved over time in a school, student performance also
improved. Trusting relationships between administrators, teachers, and students created conditions for students and teachers to take risks and extend beyond their comfort zones with a high level of support, safety, and security. Researchers have determined that solid relationships between teachers and students are correlated with students’ overall achievement (Goddard, 2003). In the same vein, Coleman (1988) contends that these strong relationships develop valuable social capital related to students’ academic success.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the benefits accrued to individuals by virtue of their ties with others through shared cultural knowledge and fluency (Portes, 2000). The concept is more broadly defined by relations of trust and shared expectations among persons in a social network (Coleman, 1988). Social capital can be used as a bargaining chip, and as noted in a publication of the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence, can help students negotiate ways out of disadvantage. The development of social capital can create and/or enhance the kinds of relationships that can help students navigate situations. In addition, strong social capital can help set agreed upon mores and supports for students, thus creating a culture of achievement and scholarship. Accruing social capital is critical for a student’s development, and can be transferable to any setting, college or career. The investments made in developing these social relationships enable people to obtain things they value, such as information, emotional support, material assistance, access to job opportunities, and wider social contacts, as outlined in research facts and findings from Social Capital and the Well-being of Youth (2003).
The publication further posits that social capital is a useful concept for addressing how youth well-being is affected by the character of the various social settings in which they grow up. Students learn from various people and places, and the depth of that impact is related to the level of support and connection one has with others. It is also very useful in understanding the experiences that inform young people’s sense of connection to places and people and the ways in which they come to be adults who have a sense of responsibility and reciprocity in the various social settings they occupy. Schools rich in social capital provide access to multiple resources, and create conditions for students to generate ties between and across social networks that might be outside a student’s typical social circle (Lin, 2000). These schools have the ability to yield better returns for marginalized groups of students by improving access to opportunities that may lead to social and economic mobility. Both students and teachers are more invested in one another and the school community, overall due to improved results that benefit all members. With social trust, cooperative environments can emerge to increase teacher buy-in and improve relations across the school, creating conditions for school reform to take place.

Generally speaking, Tschannen-Moran (2014) posits that children with positive teacher-student relationships were better able to make use of the learning opportunities available in the classroom, and were more readily adjusted to the school’s behavioral demands. This notion supports the assertion that boys of color constantly communicate at my school site: if they do not like or respect their teachers, then they will not do any work “for” that teacher. In his visits to Chicago schools, Payne (2008) learned that social relationships were key to student success, stating, “Students wanted to perform well
because of their teachers.” Personal dynamics between teachers, students, and principals influence whether or not students attend school and sustain efforts that lead to academic success, according to Bryk and Schneider (2003). While other factors play a role in school reform, relational trust is a form of social capital that explicitly aligns to and paves the way for student achievement in school communities.

**Relational Trust**

**Trust and school improvement.** School improvement is an arduous process that requires time, commitment, and intention to make any meaningful difference and to sustain change. Successful school reform will be ineffective at best without a synchronous approach by multiple constituents to improve the educational experiences and academic outcomes for students, grounded in a strong foundation of trust. From this perspective, Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert that trust, not coercion, is a necessary precondition for school reform.

Key organizational conditions are foundational in school improvement efforts, including a faculty that is invested in the mission and vision of a school, with a moral imperative to work in the best interest of all students. This is possible through a commitment to building trusting relationships throughout a school’s ecosystem. Trusting relationships between administration and teachers is necessary to increase productivity and maintain open lines of communication. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), trust fosters a set of organizational conditions that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to effect productivity.
improvements. When they are present in a school, the four broad mechanisms of relational trust allow for improvement to occur since they:

- Reduce staff vulnerability as they engage in new and uncertain reform tasks;
- Facilitate problem-solving within an organization;
- Balance autonomy and support that undergirds organizational norms; and
- Create a moral resource for improvement.

I maintain that while school leaders may be able to articulate and outline a clear course of action for improvement at the school level, trust is the cohesive glue that allows for a shift in the mindsets of teachers and students from merely complying with policies, procedures, and initiatives to fully committing to them with optimism and consistency. Trust is important in any social context because it is the “lubricant” between what is known and what is unknown (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). School communities with a sense of collective responsibility and ownership, rooted in shared values and beliefs, will benefit from sustained change. Bryk and Schneider (2002) further contend that in order to sustain effective school improvement, reforms must be founded on beliefs and observed behaviors as outlined by the interplay among the four considerations at the core of relational trust:

1. Respect: Genuinely listening and valuing the opinions of others during social discourse, which takes place across the school community and has a bearing on future actions and interactions.
2. Competence: Execution of an individual’s formal responsibilities to achieve desired outcomes. There is a recognition of the interdependence of roles in
attaining the desired outcome. When negligence or incompetence is allowed to persist in any one role in the school, it undermines trust.

3. Personal Regard for Others: The willingness of members of a school community to extend themselves beyond what their roles might formally require in any given situation. Mutual dependence, personal vulnerabilities, and social affiliation of personal meaning are important. Actions are made in an effort to reduce others’ sense of vulnerability.

4. Integrity: Consistency between what a person says and does. A belief and perception that a moral-ethical perspective guides one’s work. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, pp. 23-25)

Bryk and Schneider (2002) concluded that trust was a critical factor in predicting whether or not schools would make the greatest gains in student achievement, and which of those schools would sustain those gains over time. Despite Payne’s (2000) argument that trust alone cannot bring about school improvement, I find that, based on my professional experiences, trust among multiple stakeholders affords a certain luxury of freedom to learn from mistakes as the formula for success is adjusted and revised over time. The success of creative solutions and interventions through multiple iterations and attempts further cements trust, which could lead to an environment in which members are willing to demonstrate vulnerability. The demonstration of vulnerability in the school setting may help to decrease anxiety and pressure experienced by both adults and students. As a result, members in the community are more receptive to viewing mistakes as learning opportunities as opposed to failures.
Trust and positive academic behaviors and outcomes. A student’s trajectory for success, on some level, is connected to the quality of student-teacher relationships. When teachers demand more, and students feel a level of connection to their school community, favorable conditions exist that promote higher achievement. Meier (2002) posits that trust is essential to advance the academic mission of a school, and that the dropout rate will lower if teachers focus on teaching to students’ interests to help engage them in learning. When teachers believe in a student’s ability to perform in the classroom and are invested in helping students reach their academic potential, they are more apt to deliver lessons that are cognitively demanding and engaging. As a corollary to that notion, students respond to stated expectations and perform at higher levels of achievement.

Hughes (2011) shows that when a student perceives a teacher as accepting, trustworthy and available, whether congruent with other sources of information on the relationship or not, the student is more likely to seek out the teacher’s assistance, rely on the teacher as a source of felt security, and please the teacher. Trust is a necessary precondition to an environment in which students perceive and experience support and demands from their teachers. Trust in a school supports a positive school climate and, according to Hughes (2011), children who experience social support from teachers will construct a positive sense of school membership and academic self-concept that promotes greater effort and persistence, as well as a commitment to school rules and norms. Members of the community may have increased pride in their school based on the relationships that are formed that leads to an increase in cooperation and collaboration.
Benner and Wang (2014) posit that students form emotional bonds with teachers and peers that, in turn, facilitate school investment, educational effort, and active participation in school. Additional research on the topic of adolescent development and achievement (Benner & Wang, 2014) reports that responsive relationships with educators are a key developmental need of adolescents. That notion is supported by Hughes (2011), whose research draws from attachment theory that asserts that a warm and supportive teacher-student relationship may provide a child with a sense of felt security that promotes the child’s free and active participation in classroom learning activities. My own view, based on my experiences as a teacher and school leader, is that students are more apt to engage in the lesson, freely participate, and take academic risks in classrooms where teachers have consistently demonstrated their commitment to students’ success. As teachers exhibit their efforts to create positive conditions in the learning environment, where all are welcome and valued, students’ anxieties are lessened and learning can take place.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) states that the more students are able to trust their teachers, the more willing they are to open themselves up to the risks involved in learning both the academic content and the social and emotional skills they need for academic and life success. A climate of trust, mutual respect, cooperation, and collaboration among children, their teachers, peers, and parents must be established. When this happens, children will feel safe and supported in their schools and classrooms, attached and involved with school, and bonded to teachers and peers (Slaughter-Defoe & Glinert-Carson, 1996). Behavioral engagement, including participatory activities such as attendance, class participation, and extracurriculars are indicators that trust exists. Benner

To bring about school improvement, the professional practice of teachers in the classroom should consider connecting lessons to students’ interests, and draw explicit connections to their lives that would deepen the student-teacher relationship. When teachers trust their students, a stronger press for academic achievement is more likely (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Furthermore, Smart (2014) states that teacher-student interactions have the potential to affect students on many levels, including achievement, motivation, and adjustment to school. When a trusting relationship exists between students and teachers, it can transform learning. Trust is the foundation for taking academic risks to build knowledge and extend thinking (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001).

Thijs and Fleischmann (2014) have found that numerous studies in educational and developmental psychology have concluded that students’ affective relationships with their teachers are crucial for their academic motivation and school engagement. Connected to school engagement is the idea that a positive relationship with teachers predicts improvements in children’s cooperative and effortful engagement in the classroom, and with peer acceptance and academic achievement (Hughes, 2011). The following items as outlined by Slaughter-Defoe and Glinert-Carson (1996), assess the dimensions of positive relationships between students and adults in the school. In addition, they emphasize the focus on students’ perceptions of behaviors that teachers use to motivate them that include:
● Verbal encouragement of academic performance;
● How fair adults in the school are;
● How much teachers respect students; and
● How much teachers care about students.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) argue that when teachers and students trust each other and work together collaboratively, learning follows from the climate of safety and warmth that prevails. One such construct, linked to students’ trust in teachers and to student achievement, is the degree to which students identify with their school. This issue is important because teachers and students who feel connected to their school may be empowered to participate in the decision-making process that helps share responsibility and develop trust (Mitra, 2006).

**Trust and Engagement.** Trust is at the center of instructional, social, and relational interactions between teachers and students, and can either produce or inhibit achievement (Pianta & Allen, 2008). Relationships and interactions between students and teachers within a classroom can offer developmentally meaningful and challenging experiences. This finding is supported by student anecdotal data gathered before my study, in which students frequently reported that they were more motivated to arrive to class in a punctual manner if classes were more interesting, engaging, and relevant to their lives.

I maintain that the instructional core that illustrates the relationship among the teacher, student, and the content is directly connected to increasing student engagement in the classroom. The process of increasing student learning only occurs as a consequence
of improvements in the level of content, teachers’ knowledge and skills, and engagement with students. Therefore, when teachers are more fluent in their content areas, build a repertoire of strategies to manage classroom behaviors, and develop student relationships, then students are more willing to engage at a deeper level in their classes. Students in my study report that if they like a teacher, then they will work harder to earn their respect and admiration—which is directly related to the notion of the instructional core.

The process of teaching and learning is fundamentally relational; one of the most important aspects of relationships in schools is how connected people feel to one another (Nieto, 2012). Thapa et al.’s research (2013) aligns with that of Jia et al. (2009), who collectively posit that caring student and teacher relationships are positively associated with increases in grade point averages. Smart (2014) agrees that research on teacher-student interactions in early childhood, elementary, and secondary settings have shown that some types of classroom interactions can have a positive effect on various outcomes, including student academic development, achievement, and attitudes toward learning. Just as LaRusso, Romer, & Selman (2008) found that teacher encouragement of mutual respect was the strongest predictor of changes in academic efficacy and self-regulation in middle schools, based on my professional experience, once teachers and students develop mutual respect for each other, students are more likely to self-manage their behaviors, work hard to complete tasks, cooperate with peers, and comply with school policies and procedures. Osterman (2000) contends that students with a sense of belonging who experience positive involvement in the classroom will more readily demonstrate acceptance of authority and regulate their own behavior in the classroom.
This finding is further supported by Montague and Rinaldi (2001), who state that more effective instructional and classroom management strategies lead to more positive interactions with at-risk students. According to this finding, students and teachers commit to maintaining a respectful learning environment when a trusting working relationship exists. Tschannen-Moran (2014) posit that teachers’ trust in students is indirectly related to achievement, as observed in student attendance rates and discipline referral rates. My viewpoint on the matter, based on my experiences at the school site, is that there are other factors besides teacher-student trust that impact attendance rates and discipline referrals, such as peer pressure or caregivers’ school engagement level, which can adversely affect student engagement and achievement.

As shown in the literature, perceived emotional support is a characteristic of high-quality interactions that are linked to increased student achievement and academic motivation. As such, the school must be strategic in developing trust with parents and caregivers to reinforce positive messaging about the correlation between achievement and attendance rates.

**Trust and parents.** Parents’ relationships and experiences with teachers play a primary role in the depth of student-teacher relationships. Personal dynamics between teachers, students, and parents influence whether or not students attend school and sustain efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). When parents trust the teachers, students typically do the same. As such, parents are more inclined to support teachers’ efforts in the classroom when they trust that teachers have the best interests of their students at heart, work to maintain open lines of communication, and leverage parent voices and input into the
development of learning experiences that meet the needs of each student (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The creation of trust among constituents is grounded in multiple, ongoing social interactions and exchanges that frame relationships. Tschannen-Moran (2014) states that the level of academic emphasis in students’ homes has been found to be a strong predictor of the level of students’ trust in their teachers.

**Relational trust summary.** As evidenced through research conducted by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Tschannen-Moran (2014), relational trust is the foundation for school improvement. Trusting relationships among adults in the school environment allow for teachers to more actively engage in ongoing dialogue about practices that lead to student achievement. When teachers know their students and can connect with them beyond the classroom, then students feel more compelled to attend school, ask for help when needed, and persevere through difficult tasks. Students take cues from teachers who serve as role models when demonstrating the importance of maintaining a growth mindset by making meaning through making mistakes — a demonstration of vulnerability. As a result, students are more inclined to take academic risks in the classroom that may lead to increased discourse and development of strong student voice. The incorporation of student and parent voices into school-based decision-making helps students feel like valued members of the school community. As posited by Mitra (2013), when student voice and involvement in school level policies and decisions are valued, it becomes part of the school’s intrinsic culture, thus becoming institutionalized.
School Climate and Culture

Climate, culture, and outcomes. In addition to trust, the manner in which students view their school climate and culture has an impact on their behaviors exhibited in school, and their academic performance (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). The Chicago school research shows a clear connection between social trust, relationship building, students’ perceptions of school climate, and student academic achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Connectedness focuses on caring and respectful relationships which, in turn, have been linked with academic outcomes (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Lindstrom, 2014). Trust and climate must be considered part and parcel of school reform, with a potential to be a driving force of change.

Feinberg and Stein (1999) describe climate and culture as the school’s heart and soul, and its essence draws teachers and students to love the school and want to be a part of it. To add to this idea, MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) state that climate is often viewed as behavioral, while culture is seen as comprising the values and norms of the school. The authors go on to state that climate is a manifestation of culture and that if the culture is not hospitable to learning, then student achievement can suffer. Bryk & Schneider’s (2003) research underscores the importance of building a positive school climate and culture through co-construction by its many members. That positive climate is sustained through a mutual sharing and appreciation of core values, along with collaborative efforts to building trust across the setting. Central to relational trust is the amount of exertion that teachers and other stakeholders are willing to commit to creating a positive school climate (Rhoden, 2017). Koth et al. (2008) agree with Rhoden’s (2017) research, and posit that a positive school climate is the product of social interactions.
between students and teachers where educational and social values drive what transpires in the classroom and schoolwide.

Mounting evidence shows that school climate has a critical and powerful influence on students’ social and academic outcomes, as reported by Diazgrenados Ferráns and Selman (2014). Empirical evidence from the study further suggests that students who have positive perceptions of their school climate exhibit greater attachment to their school and possess stronger academic values and feelings of academic competence as well. Wang et al. (1997) are in agreement, and their research found that school culture and climate are among the top influences affecting improved student achievement.

As this brief review of the literature on climate and culture indicates, prosocial behavior, such as care for others that exists between teachers and students, students and their peers, as well as teachers and their colleagues, all play a significant role in the ability to sustain a positive, safe, and welcoming school climate and culture where rigorous learning can take place. At the center of an effective learning experience is a school community with a positive climate and culture that is grounded in relational trust. These characteristics create conditions for students to engage in meaningful interactions with teachers and peers that can help develop and sustain motivation (Furrer, Skinner & Pitzer, 2014) and feel more connected to their school. When this occurs, students are more motivated to attend, engage in classes, and develop a positive perception of their school, teachers, the community, and themselves.
Climate, culture, and student identities. Social capital—the existence of strong, supportive relationships—is directly connected to a positive climate and culture that values the assets that students bring to bear on the community. Initial stages of trust-building between staff and students are formed by bridging school and community and affirming cultural backgrounds of students. The ability of educators to make classroom experiences relevant to the lives of students motivates them to actively engage and persevere through difficult tasks (Ali, 2015). According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), in schools with improving relational trust, teachers increasingly characterize their colleagues as committed and loyal to their school and are more eager to engage in new practices that might help students learn better. As such, the creation of professional learning communities that allow for teachers to partake in an open, reflective, ongoing dialogue about culturally and linguistically sustaining professional practices can lead to more refined and effective learning experiences that celebrate students’ cultures and backgrounds. When teachers are allowed routine time to collaborate on planning lessons and share best practices that are relevant, engaging, and meaningful to students, the idea of collective responsibility is developed and sustained (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Multiple relational levels within the school, such as organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, are the shaping forces that lead to the core elements of relational trust, social exchanges, and discernment of intentions of others that can catalyze into a more supportive learning environment with instructional improvements and student success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

School climate and culture summary. The literature indicates that relational trust with ties to social capital and a positive school climate and culture are important
elements to have in place for students to develop strong identities and behaviors that yield positive academic outcomes. When learning experiences are culturally relevant, students are more engaged and are able to understand and apply concepts to their lives. The learning process is relational at its core, and safe, caring, and responsive school climates tend to foster a greater attachment to the school and provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning for middle school and high school students to take place (Thapa et al., 2013).

**Intersectionality: Academic Press, Sense of Belonging, and Stereotype Threat**

As noted in my concept map at the beginning of this chapter, a clear relationship exists between social capital and relational trust that impacts student perspectives on school climate and culture. Related to these ideas, academic press, sense of belonging, and stereotype threat also converge to influence students’ perceived place in the school community. Stereotype threat, in particular, is important to understand so that teachers are aware of its impact on the academic progress of students of color.

**Stereotype threat defined.** The theory of stereotype threat makes several assumptions about individuals who have become domain-identified. Students who feel connected to their school community identify with their school or domain. As a result, students who identify with their school face the threat that the judgments of others or their own actions will negatively stereotype them in that domain. Sustained school success requires identification with the school and its subdomains, yet societal pressures on these domain-identified groups can frustrate this identification. In school domains
where these groups are negatively stereotyped (Steele, 1997), student performance is impacted.

To apply this theory to an urban school setting where students of color, particularly boys of color, encounter negative stereotypes about their cognitive abilities, it can be detrimental to future prospects if the student self-identifies with his racial group and the presumed lack of school achievement of boys of color. Steele (1997) contends that if the threat is experienced in the midst of a domain performance, such as classroom presentation or test-taking, the student’s emotional reaction may directly interfere with performance. A costly adaptation for boys of color is the disidentification from the school that may undermine sustained motivation and reinforce stereotypes that exist for this group. Therefore, for a stereotype to become a threat, it must be self-relevant to an individual. Boys of color in my study run the risk of internalizing the stereotypes that impact how they view themselves, which may lessen their ability to perform at their optimal level.

**Implications of stereotype threat and microaggressions.** Without even realizing it, teachers bring their entire selves into the teaching and learning situation and, in the most damaging cases, this may include their stereotypes, negative judgments, and preconceptions (Nieto, 2012). As cited by Steele (1997), research conducted by Howard and Hammond (1985) made the argument that once “rumors of inferiority” about Black students pervade the environment, they can intimidate Black students. The notions of inferiority become internalized by students and, in turn, lead to a low sense of self-efficacy, demotivation, and underperformance in schools. Thus, stereotyped students are
affected by this notion of rumors of inferiority and stereotype threat on a daily basis, which may cause emotional distress and pressure. Steele’s (1997) research is underscored by Taylor and Walton (2011), who posit that stereotype threat prevents students who are stereotyped from fully acquiring academic knowledge and skills despite their level of intellectual potential. The interference that stereotype threat causes has psychological consequences that lead to decreased working memory. These researchers further posit that a notion of ‘double jeopardy’ exists for stereotyped students whereby the acquisition and retrieval of academic knowledge are negatively impacted by stereotype threat. In addition to these threats, students of color face micro-level racism on a regular basis in schools.

Microaggressions, as defined by Ackerman-Barger, Bakerjian, and Latimore (2015), are brief everyday exchanges in which people of color, women, LGBT individuals, people with disabilities, and religious minorities are denigrated, whether intentionally or not. Instances of repeated microaggressions on marginalized groups over time have a tendency to impact an individual’s confidence and identity. In addition, Hotchkins (2016) contends that the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions on Black males negatively impact self-image, academic performance, and social navigation skills. These outcomes will also have a negative bearing on the ability of boys of color to build trusting relationships with teachers. As a result, their performance may suffer, and their perceptions of the school culture will be equally unfavorable. Feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and frustration are increased with exposure to racial microaggressions (Hotchkins, 2016).
Ackerman-Barger et al. (2015) add to Hotchkins’ (2016) research, and find that microaggressions can be distracting, exhausting, and painful for recipients because they must try to figure out the meaning and intent of the microaggression and then decide whether and how to respond. I believe that this leads boys of color to become disengaged from the learning process since their energy and working memory are stressed by stereotypes and microaggressions. It is important that members of a school community are attuned to and sensitive to their biases and prejudices that impact the manner in which they engage with students who are different from them. As Nieto (2012) argues, truly understanding how to teach students requires one to look at oneself honestly, ask hard questions about one’s privilege and power, and reflect upon how one uses these in their teaching. It means asking about one's biases, hidden or overt, and how they influence one's relationships with students. Teachers who engage with and who invest in the development of students from various walks of life are in a better position to be sensitive to their own potential to initiate microaggressions, to mitigate a culture that allows them, and to support students when they experience them (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2015). The negative impact on students’ identities and academic performances caused by stereotype threat and microaggressions can be overcome, however. The following discusses interventions that can shift the mindsets of teachers and mitigate instances of stereotype threat, and connects these interventions to the concepts of relational trust and positive school climate and culture discussed above.

**Interventions to lessen the impact of stereotype threat.** In order to address the academic and psychological stress caused by stereotype threat, school environments must be intentional in the design and continuous implementation of resources and support that
promote a safe, welcoming climate and culture that is accepting of multiple identities. It is important to note that every individual is potentially vulnerable to stereotype threat, because every individual has at least one social identity that is targeted by a negative stereotype in some given situation (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Interventions that lessen the ramifications of stereotype threat should be triaged so that the right interventions are made for the right students at the right time (Steele, 1997):

1. Build optimistic teacher-student relationships where students will worry less about people in their school environment doubting their abilities. Critical feedback, coupled with optimism about their potential, are strongly motivating for Black students.
   a. This notion of positive teacher-student relationships aligns with relational trust; thus, the environment is more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to effect productivity improvements (Bryk, 2002).

2. Focus on challenge over remediation that conveys respect for stereotyped students, rejecting the notion of deficit lenses.
   a. Respect is one of the four domains of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and is emphasized through this intervention to decrease stereotype threat. With strong student-teacher relationships, challenging work becomes a conversation between constituents that eliminate barriers to entry and access.
3. Stress the expandability of intelligence that aligns with Carol Dweck’s (1986) research showing that human intelligence is incremental in nature and is expanded based on experience and training.

4. Affirm domain belongingness by directly affirming that stereotyped students belong to the community and their intellectual potential.
   a. Students who have positive perceptions of their school climate exhibit greater attachment to their school (Diazgrenados Ferráns and Selman, 2014) and have stronger academic values and feelings of academic competence as well.

5. Value multiple perspectives that advocate for a variety of approaches to the academic culture that communicates to stereotyped students that the school environment does not welcome the stereotypes.
   a. This intervention also supports a climate and culture that promotes academic press and increases students’ sense of connectedness and belonging to the community.

6. Connect role models with students to emphasize the message that stereotype threat is not an insurmountable barrier.

7. Implement nonjudgmental responsiveness where there is little cost of failure in order to gradually build efficacy for stereotyped students.
   a. This intervention helps build connectedness through a sense of support from teachers in the school community that could lead to academic press and improved student outcomes.
8. Build self-efficacy that promotes students' sense of competence in the school environment (Steele, 1997, pp. 624-625).

   a. Students’ sense of self-efficacy leads to a connection with the school domain where education is valued by their input and knowledge that is connected to academic press.

In addition to the interventions outlined above (Steele, 1997), Spencer et al. (2016), posit that laboratory interventions aim to reduce the pernicious effects of stereotype threat in three ways: reconstrue a potentially threatening situation as nonthreatening; provide targets with a way to cope with the threat; and change the environment to reduce the threat itself. Likewise, the creation of identity-safe environments (Davies, 2018) where people feel connected and belong, and are assured that their social identities are not a barrier to access or an obstacle to success, will help remove the threat in the air, enabling marginalized individuals to work to capacity and reach their full potential.

Students of color encounter countless microaggressions and stereotype threats on a daily basis. The antidote is in the power of knowing thyself. Teachers must honestly examine themselves to take stock of their biases and understand the impact they have on their interactions with students. Nieto (2014) calls for teachers to ask the hard questions about one's privilege and power, and about how one uses these in the teaching and learning context. And, it means taking into account one's true feelings about particular students, and asking whether one thinks that all students are capable and worthy. If we
are able to consciously do this without cessation, I believe that the opportunity gap can and will be closed because students will rise to the expectations set before them.

**Summary**

Various literature and research reviewed in this chapter helped shed light on the intellectual bins that surfaced through my research questions. My study examines underlying issues related to students’ racial identities, perceptions of academic expectations held by teachers and resultant performance, and emotional investments grounded in relational trust. I explore these concepts through a sample of boys of color experiences at my school site. The study is focused on understanding the intersectionality between three themes of social capital, relational trust, and school climate and culture, as surfaced through multiple methods of data collection for this subgroup of students. The conceptual framework graphic at the beginning of this chapter details those themes. Themes and conclusions, drawn from the existing literature on social capital, relational trust, school climate and culture, and stereotype threat, were taken into my account and analysis of student data. Stories and lived experiences shared by students in the study are unique, but also show commonalities related to issues surrounding race and the manner in which boys of color negotiate those experiences. Complexities exist for students in terms of their depth of association with multiple identities, and the relationships with others in the community that serve to support or dismantle those identities.

Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) work with relational trust and the Chicago Public Schools provided a lens to understand the impact relationships among constituents have on educational improvement. However, much of the research on relational trust studied
the elementary level, and little research has been conducted in the secondary space. Few, if any studies exist that examine the impact of relational trust with boys of color in the secondary school space, and fewer still have examined the relationships between academic press, sense of belonging, and stereotype threat. While Hotchkins’ (2016) research examined the influence racial microaggressions had on African American high school students through a comparative case study approach, his study did not include the perspectives of Latino boys thus not allowing for a straightforward comparison between his research and mine.

Additionally, other studies have focused on one variable or another such as relational trust, but few studies have examined high school boys of color as it relates to social belonging and academic press, collectively. Some studies exist that determine the role that relational trust plays on student behaviors in the high school setting, but not on students’ sense of belonging and its resulting impact on student perspectives of school climate and culture through a lens of relational trust. This is a gap that my study begins to address.

This published research coupled with Steele’s (1997) research on stereotype threat helped me to process and analyze boys’ of color daily experiences in the school environment that challenged and questioned their racial and other identities, and its resulting impact on their level of connectedness at the school and on their perceptions of their school climate and culture. Taken together, I hypothesize that the more connected, affirmed, and trusted students feel in their school environment, the greater the effect on their academic progress and press. My study is one that looks at the complexity and
interrelationship of a number of factors in the lived experiences of boys of color in high school. The subtle, nuanced depth of those experiences are complex and interrelated, and influence student performance, confidence, and perseverance.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The conceptual framework that I have developed for my research study which can be found in Chapter 2, provides a map for an analysis of the perceived social and academic interactions between teachers and boys of color at a high school in Boston. In addition, I explore the influence of the perceptions the boys have on school climate and culture. I examine whether or not relational trust plays an integral role in the development of the perceptions that boys of color possess on school climate and culture at this particular school. Student behaviors, including attendance issues, violations to school rules and routines, and disengagement from the school community, are important factors that should be studied in the future once the perceptions that boys of color have on school climate and culture are analyzed. That way, the gathered data could help determine whether or not those perceptions and behaviors correspond.

The qualitative research approach to this study helps explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social, or human, problem (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the problem specifically relates to the development of relational trust in a turnaround high school in Boston. The aim of my phenomenological study is to understand the perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of the interactions between boys of color and their teachers, due to their potential impact on academic performance. The purpose is to make meaning of the perspectives that boys of color possess in a high school that has recently experienced significant turnover in staff due to its turnaround status. As such, I am interested in understanding how the recently assembled staff is doing in terms of developing and nurturing a trusting culture and climate. Students’ sense of belonging is predicated on meaningful relationships with teachers who take an interest
in their lives, setting the conditions for success (Thijs & Fleischmann, 2014). As a result, staff turnover could have an impact on the depth of students’ connectedness.

The study explores the perspectives of the participants on the influence that relationships with their teachers and administrators have on their work habits, decisions, and ability to persevere in the face of adversity. The data I obtained through focus groups on relational factors that may contribute to success in the classroom was used to glean information about the perspectives that boys of color hold. In addition, district survey data that is gathered on an annual basis to gauge students’ perspectives was analyzed with the aim of triangulating that data with the data from my academic journey journal, along with focus group data. An analysis that spans across different data sets can lead to a firmer understanding of how students view their school and their relationships within it. I gathered data from a variety of sources and looked across it to illuminate the case through a cross analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Based on this design, a sample of students serves as the primary unit of analysis for my research study. With students at the core of the study, I can better understand how the mental models, expectations, and interactions of teachers with these boys impact their academic and social success. The visual depiction of the study’s conceptual framework, as found in Chapter 2, details the relationship between students, as the primary unit of analysis, and factors that play a role in their academic success. The study, as designed, enabled me as the researcher to address ‘why’ questions, while taking into consideration ‘how’ a phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it exists. The concept
map helped me to recognize unexpected connections, and identify holes and contradictions in theory and figure out ways to address them (Maxwell, 2013).

Several research questions grounded my study:

- How do boys of color experience daily social and academic interactions with teachers?
- What attitudes do these students possess about their school’s climate and culture?
  - How do boys’ of color beliefs about their relationships with teachers affect their connections to school?
- What is the relationship, if any, between relational trust and boys’ of color perceptions of school?

Because I entered into this study as an action researcher with the school under study being my work site, it is critical to strip away the unexamined theoretical baggage that has accumulated around almost everything I do in schools (Anderson, Herr, & Sigrid Nihlen, 2007). Therefore, my assumptions and biases, as related to my setting, must be suspended to allow for the familiar to seem strange, and to approach the study with an open mind and clean perspective while simultaneously reflecting on how my positionality impacts the manner in which I process and understand findings. As a way to gain further insight into my workplace and to improve my practice, along with ameliorating conditions for all students that could lead to more favorable experiences and outcomes, the process of practitioner action research allowed me to systematize the analysis of my practice, which in turn gave me a fresh view of the relational dynamics at my school.
The Student Sample: Participant Selection Criteria

I used a combination of Key Informant and Complete Target Population sampling to create the participant group for this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As of November 2017, there were a total of 126 ninth graders at the high school, of which my focus was on a purposeful sampling of the total freshmen population. After the end of the first quarter, the attendance rate for this group was 83.5%, and the percentage of students with at least one D or F who appeared on the D and F list was 56.3%, the majority being students of color. Based on the grade reports for the first half of the year that included an analysis of attendance and discipline trends, I decided to focus on all 32 Black boys in ninth grade. With a focus on all of the Black freshmen boys, I aimed, through this study, to provide conditions for academic and social interventions at the inception of the high school experience in order to bolster the skills of Black boys in and outside the classroom.

At the outset of the study, I planned to divide the group into three subgroups: academically struggling students; students making academic progress; and, students in the academic middle who demonstrated average growth. After several meetings with student groups regarding the intent of my study, 11 students followed through by returning a signed consent form (see Appendix F), some being Latino. At this time, I made the decision to lessen the emphasis on the three-tiered academic standing criteria, and decided to highlight the profile of each of the 11 participants. Their perspectives and understanding of the daily interactions and experiences with teachers and its impact on their perceptions of the school climate and culture were studied. The 11 boys who were interested in the study are profiled in Table 1 below:
Table 1

*Student Participant Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Program</th>
<th>Section of the City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Javier</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>South Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marquis</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dante</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>Dorchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>Dorchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>South Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>Dorchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilfredo</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>South Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>Hyde Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>South Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Dorchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>Dorchester</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student participants in the three focus groups were chosen based on their level of interest in the study, and their potential for impacting school-based decisions for the betterment of the community, in general, and the student body, specifically. Eleven boys of color, all in the 10th grade, participated in three separate focus groups to share and reflect on their experiences at the school during their freshman year, and to contribute to a dialogue amongst their peers about their hopes and concerns for the school community, as well as future academic and personal goal setting. The sample size of 11 boys consisted of six Black males and five Hispanic males, of which four were identified to have a learning disability. Just over one-third of the boys in the sample live within walking distance of the school, while the others live in neighboring communities across
the city. Each of the boys in the sample demonstrated an interest in participating in this research study to help contribute to a positive, thriving school community that values student input and perspective not only from students of color, but from all students.

An almost equal representation of Black and Latino boys participated in my study, ranging between 15 and 18 years of age. Their ages indicate that some of these boys had repeated a grade at some point along their educational careers. A fair number of the various neighborhoods in the city are represented in the sample of student participants, which speaks to the potential for patterns to emerge based on that commonality.

**Methods and Research Design**

**Data collection methods.**

*Focus groups.* Three focus groups were led by a Black male independent researcher that included participants from a subsection of boys of color at the high school in grade nine. In compliance with requirements from the Boston Public Schools, and to mitigate the impact that my positionality may have on student responses, I secured an independent researcher to facilitate focus group discussions and conduct subsequent student interviews as needed. The purpose of the informal interviews was to seek clarification on certain statements student made in previous focus groups, and took place prior to the subsequent focus group discussions when the researcher was present at the school site. In preparation for the focus groups, the independent researcher and I met on two separate occasions to discuss the focus group (see Appendix C) and developed interview protocols to ensure that they were implemented with fidelity, and that the researcher was clear about the purpose and intent of the study, as a whole. The process of
conducting the focus groups was also discussed so that the researcher could surface important experiences and interactions from students, including asking follow-up questions to provide additional context and detail. We had another meeting after the first focus group to debrief and to plan for subsequent focus groups. After I transcribed the first focus group, I held a conference call with the independent researcher to discuss adjustments to the protocol and process for effectiveness and efficiency for the second focus group.

A total of 11 students of color returned the consent forms that allowed them to fully participate in the focus groups. The first focus group consisted of five students, all of whom were Black with the exception of one Latino. None of these participants had any classes together which may be a barrier to openly sharing ideas and opinions. The second focus group consisted of three Black boys with an established friendship dating back to at least a year. Both focus groups were conducted using the focus group protocol, consisting of ten questions meant to elicit stories and experiences as lived by the participants. The third group consisted of three boys. The focus group protocol (see Appendix D) was revised to further elicit experiences from student participants that would aid in the recollection of events or experiences that shaped their views about the school’s climate and culture.

Each focus group took place outside of class time so that there was minimal disruption to students’ academic schedule. The researcher used a focus group protocol that consisted of multiple open-ended questions to garner in-depth responses from students, based on their experiences with teachers and other staff at the school. My intent
was to gather firsthand accounts of their understanding of the connections between the depth of their relationships with teachers and their academic performance. These student accounts provided deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data that are centrally important to my research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reflective engagement of individual and group perspectives in the focus group context allowed me to build insight into their understanding of the magnitude of the impact that relationships have on their views of the school’s climate and culture, and potentially shed some light on their academic success.

**Journal entries and field notes.** Through the process of routine leadership journaling, I carefully recorded actions and interactions in context, including that which might be unnoticeable without focused and intentional observation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During these observations, I made note of the following indicators:

- Conversation Type (social or academic)
- Initiator of the Interaction (student or teacher)
- Physical Proximity (near, mid-distant, far)
- Teacher and Student Affect (positive or negative)
- Teacher and Student Engagement (positive or negative)
- Perceived Tone (positive or negative)

My reflective journal entries were written during and after observations, which included both structured and unstructured time such as lunch in the cafeteria, hallway transitions, advisory, and study hall.
Document review - BIMAS Data. BIMAS, the Behavior Intervention Monitoring Assessment System, is a tool that measures social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in adolescents based on 34 items that are used for universal screening and response to intervention. BIMAS data, collected on the population of students of color based on the perceptions of their teachers, were also used to determine whether or not behaviors exhibited by these boys of color would be indicative of a lesser sense of belonging.

Summary of Data Collection Methods

My research study included three focus groups, consisting of between three and five participants, using a protocol of 10 questions facilitated by an independent researcher. Through this process of data gathering, I was able to hear the convergent and divergent experiences of the student participants in these three groups. After the completion of the first focus group, I revised the original focus group protocol in an attempt to surface more detailed accounts from the participants that may have an impact on how they view their school community. As a result, I was able to develop an understanding of how boys of color at the school experience interactions on a daily basis.

Following the conclusion of the third focus group, I requested and analyzed survey result data received from the central office that measured students’ responses as they relate to engagement, safety, and environment. Throughout the data collection phase, I recorded journal entries based on my observations of interactions between students of color and teachers throughout common spaces in the building. These reflections, along with data gathered through the BIMAS universal screener, were
triangulated with the other data sources described above to deepen my growing understanding of the context and actual daily experiences of males of color at the school.

**Data Analysis**

**Analytic Approach**

The primary goal of qualitative interviews was to gain focused insight into the students’ lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) to deepen my understanding of the dynamics between teachers and boys of color, and the impact those dynamics have on conditions for academic success. Based on an analysis of data from the second focus group, more detailed stories surfaced that may be related to a number of factors, including the level of familiarity between the three participants in this particular focus group. Students in the second group have multiple classes together and have a friendship outside the school, and so a different dynamic existed in this group. They were more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions due to their familiarity with one another.

Table 2 outlines deductive codes, generated according to the concept map described in Chapter 2, that were used to organize the data from each focus group.

**Table 2**

*Deductive Codes and their Associated Definitions.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Personal Regard</td>
<td>Teachers’ concern for students outside of the classroom setting. Actions on both ends of the relationship are made in an effort to reduce the others’ sense of vulnerability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Competence</td>
<td>Ability of an individual to successfully achieve outcomes based on their responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Respect</td>
<td>With full attention, listening to others during discourse across the school community that has a bearing on future actions and interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Integrity</td>
<td>Consistency between what a person says and does. A belief and perception that a moral-ethical perspective guides one’s work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Connectedness</td>
<td>The sense of connection one feels to the school community as a contributing member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Self Efficacy</td>
<td>One’s efficacy level based on his/her view of value in the school community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: High Expectations</td>
<td>A student’s ability to maintain high expectations for themselves based on the perceived level of expectations that teachers have for them in the school community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Student Responsibility</td>
<td>The ability of students to take responsibility for their actions and decisions based on their belongingness in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Perseverance</td>
<td>Students’ ability to persevere in the face of adversity and obstacles is reliant on their perceived place in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype Threat (Racial Identity)</td>
<td>The threat or risk a student encounters based on a teacher’s implicit bias towards a group that students identify with, such as the student’s race, and its impact on how the student behaves and interacts with others in the school community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I conducted an analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the collected data by making meaning of the information received and applying it to my school’s specific context. I categorized data from the three focus groups into the deductive codes identified.
above in Table 2. Intersections between various themes emerged, thus, three broader themes were used to better understand commonalities and differences in the participants’ experiences. Instances of similarities in experiences were used to emphasize areas of concern, shortcomings, or inefficiencies, while distinct experiences that could have profound implications on the school’s climate and culture as experienced by the student participants were also analyzed. I was certain to analyze and interpret the data with:

- Intentionality - Scrutiny that is deliberately built where interpretations are consistently checked.
- Fidelity - Maintaining the essence of truth to the participants’ experiences.
- Criticality - Being mindful of the power of interpretation where my bias does not inform participants’ experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

To gain a deeper understanding of how boys of color perceived school climate and culture, I analyzed the district’s climate and culture survey results for Black and Latino ninth-grade boys.

*Annual school climate and culture district survey.* As a measure of school performance, the school district is exploring the use of a school climate indicator through the administration of an annual student survey. The annual school climate and culture district survey administered to students utilizes multiple Likert scale ratings that provide students with an opportunity to rate their responses to various questions/statements that captures their opinions on key areas of their school experiences. The survey is focused on various dimensions of school climate: pedagogical effectiveness; physical and emotional safety; sense of belonging; teacher interest in students; value of learning; academic press
and stress; support staff; cultural relevance; student engagement; social perspective
taking; civic participation; grit; growth mindset; exposure to and appreciation of the arts;
and positive affect (see Appendix C). Common response options for the ninth-grade
population of students who responded to the survey fell along multiple Likert scales that
included polar opposites and ratings in the middle as well.

I used the survey results to the 70-question survey (see Appendix E) of Black and
Latino boys who responded to develop a firm understanding of how they experience daily
academic and social interactions with others, as it relates to the school climate
dimensions previously mentioned. Student responses to the survey items created an
opportunity for me to calibrate data between multiple sources: the district climate and
culture survey, focus groups, and my leadership journal. The survey data provided
additional context to student responses in the focus groups, which allowed me to better
contextualize student perspectives as they described their daily interactions and
social/academic experiences. These annual surveys are administered to students during
the spring of each year via a secure link associated with students’ district email accounts.
While survey results are anonymous, certain identifying information is collected, such as
race and grade level for the purpose of analysis.

Journal entries and field notes. These non-academic settings helped me identify
emerging patterns based on interactions between teachers and boys of color. I compared
and contrasted my observation findings against collected classroom observations to
identify patterns. With this information, I was able to describe how these settings are the
same and different, relationally, as compared to classrooms.
Ravitch and Carl (2016) indicate that observation can often be used as a method of data triangulation since research shows that the validity of self-reporting can be questionable. Through detailed journal entries and field notes, I was able to confirm and demonstrate inconsistencies in data collected during focus groups. As mentioned above, specific characteristics were noted during my journaling process to capture the meaning, depth, and level of comfort of various teacher/student interactions.

**Document review - BIMAS Data.** On a weekly basis, grade-level teacher teams met to discuss students who exhibit concerning academic and/or social/emotional behaviors that impede their ability to effectively function in the classroom and in the broader school community, using the BIMAS data. These behaviors often contradict established school rules and, as such, lead to disciplinary referrals. The Student Support Team (SST) meetings are a proactive approach to addressing the behaviors in an effort to mitigate them and help avoid academic failure and student disconnection from the school environment. Through the internal review of submitted SST documents to the school’s social workers, I gained a better understanding of the magnitude of concerning behaviors that may be grounded in students’ disconnectedness to school. A thorough analysis of multiple documents, including grades, discipline reports, attendance trends, and social involvement informed the questions that I developed for the focus group protocol. These documents were helpful in understanding the formal or organizational context of the study and provided context for the focal topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).
Coding Process

As a first step in the data analysis process, I developed deductive codes using my conceptual framework to help with making sense of the data. While reading through the focus group transcripts, I identified thoughts and ideas that connected to those codes. During this process, I noted that other important information did not necessarily fall into any of the deductive codes, which led to the creation of newly created inductive codes. The process that I used to analyze data is cycle coding methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The first coding method that I utilized was descriptive coding as a process to categorize topics and ideas. I looked for insights provided by my students, which resulted in inductive codes, a grounded approach. Using the previously stated data collection methods required me to chunk the data by category and/or theme relative to my research questions in order to surface interrelationships that may arise across the categories (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

While similar themes were revealed during this round, as compared to the first round about trust, new themes emerged as well. Those themes were associated with self-acceptance with multiple references made to being comfortable with the manner in which one identifies; code-switching with reflections about the meaning behind wearing an outward-facing mask to blurs one's authentic self; and issues of stereotype threat and resistance to societal norms. An individual regardless of their race or sexual orientation should be seen for who they are and not judged by another’s assumptions or biases.

I used the in vivo coding process to identify words or short phrases from the participants’ own stories and cultures to capture the authenticity of their voices and lived
experiences. Phrases that are used repeatedly by participants are good leads; they often point to regularities or patterns in the setting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Metaphors may also emerge that are meaningful in showing patterns or emotions.

Second, I used emotion coding to identify the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) as a way to highlight students’ lived realities in a meaningful way, thereby affirming and giving value to student voices.

The deductive codes and data analysis described above was informed by my conceptual framework, and led to the creation of the crosswalk data analysis (see Table 3). It was developed at the conclusion of the first focus group to highlight the interconnectedness of the codes. Since many quotes from focus groups overlap with the same code (i.e.: sense of belonging and respect), those codes were combined to create a theme. The following table provides a crosswalk between the survey scale and sample questions, and my study’s conceptual framework (see Table 3). This analysis helped me to ensure that the survey data were connected to the framework that tied into the created codes.

Table 3

_Crosswalk - Annual School Climate and Culture District Survey and Conceptual Framework._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical effectiveness</td>
<td>How good is your [science/math/English/social studies] teacher at helping you learn?</td>
<td>Relational Trust: Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical safety</td>
<td>How often do students get into physical fights at your school?</td>
<td>School Climate and Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional safety</td>
<td>How often are students unkind to each other at this school?</td>
<td>School Climate and Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?</td>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher interest in students</td>
<td>When your [science/math/English/social studies] teacher asks how you are doing, how often do you feel that he/she is really interested in your answer?</td>
<td>Relational Trust: Personal Regard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of learning</td>
<td>How much do you enjoy learning in school?</td>
<td>Academic Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic press</td>
<td>How often does your [science/math/English/social studies] teacher take time to make sure you understand the material?</td>
<td>Academic Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural relevance</td>
<td>In your classes, how often do you see people like you represented in what you study?</td>
<td>Racial identity; Sense of Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>How often do you get so focused on class activities that you lose track of time?</td>
<td>Sense of Belonging; Academic Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social perspective taking</td>
<td>Overall, how often do you try to understand the point of view of other people?</td>
<td>School Climate and Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic engagement</td>
<td>How important is it to you to actively challenge inequalities in society?</td>
<td>(Racial) Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit</td>
<td>If you fail to reach an important goal, how likely are you to try again?</td>
<td>Academic Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth Mindset</td>
<td>How much do you think that trying hard to learn something means you’re bad at it?</td>
<td>Academic Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>How often are you enthusiastic at school?</td>
<td>Academic Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic stress</td>
<td>How much do you think that your grades and test scores will determine your future?</td>
<td>Academic Press</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the data analysis process, I found that writing reflective memos helped me to recognize connections between data sets, which helped me to build a well-supported story that captured the essence of student participants’ daily experiences.

**Researcher Roles and Issues of Validity**

As the principal of a study site with a significant percentage of students experiencing a lack of academic progress and off-track behaviors, gathering information related to my research questions is intended to shed light on how students internalize and experience interactions with teachers, and to reveal the impact on their social and academic success. Students, however, may be hesitant to fully and authentically share their experiences and critical feedback with me due to my position. In addition, stories shared by students could inadvertently impact the manner in which I view teacher practice. As a result, the Boston Public School district advised me that an independent researcher needed to be obtained to collect the focus group and student interview data. With this in mind, and considering the fact that I am a Black woman leader who values
proximity and investment in all students at the school, I was cognizant of my personal biases. I was intent on ensuring that my standing with students did not intentionally influence research findings, such as the fact that my sons’ school experiences may influence the questions that I have the researcher ask of students. To ensure that students were comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions with me through the researcher, I assured them that their responses would have no bearing on their academic standing since their identities would be protected through the process. In addition, I communicated that their input would add value to the existing body of research on this topic in the field that could lead to improvements in student outcomes. I shared focus group transcripts with the students in my sample, and asked them if the transcript accurately captured their thoughts and ideas. Member checks were conducted throughout various stages of the study to ensure that feedback about the data and conclusions from the youths being studied is taken into consideration (Maxwell, 2013).

I have daily interactions with students beyond my supervisory role, including informal conversations, college and career counseling, daily encouraging words, and constant motivational pep talks. Because of the nature of my positionality as principal of the school and the relationship that I have with students, it was imperative that an independent researcher facilitate the focus groups so that students would not feel inhibited by my presence. Despite the fact that I have a solid relationship with many of my 520 students, responses could have modified their responses due to my position, power, and influence.
In an effort to address threats to validity, it is important to diminish bias that involves the subjectivity of the researcher. That subjectivity can be guided by my own personal experiences with teachers, or my relationship to the individuals and groups. However, it is impossible to deal with these issues by eliminating my own theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens (Maxwell, 2013) when analyzing another person’s perspectives. Descriptive threats refer to the factual accuracy of my methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), specifically through the transcription of field notes and jottings. As a result, I did not make inferences or take special liberties when analyzing data gathered from notes or observations. I made certain that I did not allow my understanding of the particular student or my relationship with them to cloud the emerging themes that surfaced, as I was thinking about the stories as described by students in the focus groups. Validity in qualitative research is not the result of indifference, but of integrity (Maxwell, 2013). Through the upkeep of my journal, I have kept myself constantly aware of my biases and tried to account for them. My assumptions and perspectives were captured in my journal, and I reflected on them and how they have evolved over the course of this study.
CHAPTER 4: DATA FINDINGS

The purpose of my study is to better understand the lived experiences and interactions of boys of color with their teachers. The driving force of the research is to increase my understanding of the role of relational trust in these interactions and the resulting perception of school climate and culture, based on the depth of the relationship between teachers and boys of color. My study is grounded in several guiding research questions designed to elicit stories and experiences from boys of color as they relate to social and academic interactions with teachers, to understand the role of relational trust in those interactions, and to gain insight into their perception of the school climate and culture.

Based on data I collected and analyzed, I argue in this study that boys of color internalize experiences and exchanges with teachers in a complex manner that influence their attitudes about themselves as learners and leaders, how they interact with others including adults and peers, and the school community, as an institution. This argument is presented in a narrative form that captures authentic student voice and experiences. A thematic cross-student analysis demonstrates commonalities amongst the participants, but also details distinct experiences.

Through student data collected from focus groups, the district’s annual school climate and culture survey, observations, and leadership field notes, along with the emergent themes noted in the literature review chapter of this study, I identified common themes. Those themes were related to the four elements of relational trust that emerged. Specifically, the study participants echoed each other in their shared emphasis on the
characteristics of respect and personal regard. It is evident from the data sources mentioned above that the participants understand the inner workings of school in terms of systems and structures that exist to promote a safe and welcoming school that undergird a rigorous academic environment with high expectations for everyone in the community. Students across focus groups noted the correlation between and importance of “having fun” in classes and building relationships with their teachers. Evidence, surfaced during focus groups, shows that student attitudes have the tendency to slightly shift or drastically swing in either a positive or negative direction based on the depth and quality of relational trust between teacher and student. Students’ narratives go beyond merely describing what happened to them, but also details why something happened from their points of view. The remaining part of this chapter consists of an in-depth analysis of three identified thematic codes, along with their definitions, followed by a summary of findings.

**Thematic Codes**

Based on deductive codes created through a synthesis of the literature and resulting conceptual framework, three major themes surfaced that helped to shape my understanding of the data collected from various sources. For example, during the collection and data analysis process, I realized that participants’ development and salience of racial identity was directly influenced by bias-based experiences with staff at the school. Due to that fact, a deeper understanding of stereotype threat was necessary to measure its residual effect on the manner in which students view the school community. In addition, I noticed that an overlap existed between the characteristics of relational trust, as outlined by Bryk and Schneider (2002), and the sense of belonging as described
by Mitchell, Forsyth, and Robinson (2008). Thus, these two themes were taken together to better understand participants’ daily experiences. As a result, students viewed trust as being associated with their level of connectedness to school. Finally, I noted that academic press cannot be analyzed without understanding the level of stress that occurs when students manage peripheral issues regarding the questioning of their abilities and place in the community. My study’s identified thematic codes of relational trust and sense of belonging, stereotype threat and racial identity, and academic stress and press, along with their definitions, are presented below.

Definitions

**Theme A: Relational trust and sense of belonging.** Characteristics and elements of these two themes are vastly interconnected and, as such, have been combined. Study participants describe experiences in which teachers demonstrate interest and concern for students’ lives outside of the classroom setting, sharing vulnerability as well as an affinity that opens dialogue about hopes and fears, and committing to following through on promises and expectations. Multiple micro-experiences with these relational trust elements influence students’ level of responsibility, as well as their understanding of and appreciation for their valued place in the school’s ecosystem. Examples of data related to this theme include descriptions of feeling connected to or disconnected from teachers and the school community as well as experiences of feeling misunderstood that heightened feelings of frustration and anxiety. Overall, based on favorable exchanges or breakdowns in communication, students felt they were valued as contributing members of the school community. High-quality relationships between teachers and students offer teachers insight into the attitudes and worlds of their students. These relationships also provide
students with insight into adult behavior and can support their understanding of the school’s norms and expectations. Research has indicated that reciprocal trust relationships between students and teachers can increase students’ identification as part of the school community, support student engagement, enhance student well-being, and raise the bar for all students (Mitchell, Forsyth, & Robinson, 2008; Van Mael & Van Houtte, 2011). Thus, strong relational trust is correlated with a healthy sense of belonging.

**Theme B: Stereotype threat and racial identity.** Just as the previously identified theme is intertwined, the concepts of stereotype threat and racial identity also converge. The manner in which a student racially identifies and the salience that race plays in their lives has an impact on how students behave and interact with others in the school community. The student’s identity is influenced by the threat or risk a student encounters based on a teacher’s implicit bias of their racialized group. Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as a self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Student participants’ experiences in this study relate to interactions with teachers that are perceived to be driven by certain student behaviors, outward appearance and mannerisms, and choice vernacular. Those interactions have a subsequent, direct impact on student participants’ sense of belonging and level of connectedness to teachers.

**Theme C: Academic stress and press** (Lee & Smith, 1999). This phrase is defined as the stress, anxiety, and frustration that students participating in the study face in various learning environments throughout their high school experience. That stress is
balanced by students’ motivation and ability to persevere through adversity, and ability to overcome self-doubt as they work toward academic achievement with help from stakeholders. This definition includes participants’ descriptions of how academic and social stress impact their sense of belonging, depth of relationships with teachers, and academic achievement.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Theme A: Relational Trust and Sense of Belonging.** Teachers can increase students’ sense of belonging in the school community by building trust with students through demonstrating interest in the lives of their students outside of the classroom setting, sharing vulnerability, building affinity, and by intentionally committing to follow through on promises and expectations. It is indisputable that teachers are key actors in students’ social integration and experiences in school (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2010). Across focus groups, boys of color discussed the importance of social connectedness to teachers as a way to access learning. As one student reported:

*I feel like she's just a good teacher in general because she just has so much love in her heart. She's always going to be one-on-one with you, and you one-on-one with her. [She] understands that teenagers have many emotions, and a lot on our plates, you know. But I just feel like you should be able to talk to teachers about almost anything without them judging you or something.* (Malik, Focus Group, December 2018)

This example is a clear articulation of the mutual respect and empathy expressed between teacher and student, as well as the impact that vulnerability has on the depth of that relationship. The student respects that the teacher understands the external factors that influence behavior, mood, and performance in the classroom. The genuine care conveyed through one-on-one interactions leads to a deepening of relational trust which allows a
certain level of freedom to take place when expressing academic or social/emotional needs.

Boys of color revealed that when they find classes “fun and interesting” they are more engaged; but if the class is rote, the lack of interaction leads to boredom and disconnection from the lesson. One student in the study reflected on the importance of feeling comfortable with their teachers in order for the student to effectively communicate their instructional needs to improve academic outcomes. Several students agreed with this thought and added that the level of connection to the teacher influences how freely they request help with content. One participant, for example, shared the following:

I'm gonna say something [in the classroom] because this is my future. I have to come to this class too, and I have to learn. I have to sit here with you; we're going through the same thing together. So you're going through the stress of having to teach everybody else, while I'm going through the stress of having to hear you teach, and I don't understand a thing. (Reggie, Focus Group, December 2018)

This student’s experience with one of his teachers shows that either a strain on the teacher-student relationship exists, or a level of comfort has not yet been established that led to stalled, ineffective communication that was unilateral in nature. Further conversations with the boys showed that when teachers conduct more frequent checks for understanding, it makes the material more manageable to retain and apply to new situations. In this manner, the needs of the student are addressed, and the likelihood that a student experiences frustration and/or disengagement from the lesson, the teacher, the classroom, or the school community is diminished.
Another participant related the following experience with his teacher based on his perception of the role that his disability plays in teacher-student relationships/interactions.

I can't sit still, I talk a lot, I get it, but I made a goal to work on myself and do better in December and for the rest of my school-thing. I told him that, and I feel like once you do something wrong, that's just it. You're done in his eyes. (Dante, Focus Group, December 2018)

This same student juxtaposed the previous experience with a teacher to a different one that he had with another teacher, showing how a sense of belonging and personal regard are correlated to his connection with the content and the teacher:

The way she explains something, she'll explain the hardest thing in the simplest way without talking at you, like you are dumb. ...This teacher explains things in the most common voice. And, she pulls you aside and talks to you. She won't blast it out loud. She'll leave the classroom and talk to you outside the door. (Dante, Focus Group, December 2018)

This student participant’s confidence was increased based on the respectful and empathetic manner in which the teacher addressed his confusion with the material covered in class, allowing his anxiety to decrease and his working memory and performance to increase. These types of school barriers that exist for the boys in this study influenced the level of support that they sought from their teachers.

One of the boys shared an example of a teacher violating trust when he described how his teacher shared quiz performance data along with identifiable student information with the entire class, which invaded his privacy and impacted subsequent teacher-student interactions. Open lines of communication could have prevented this from happening and the rift created in the relationship could have been averted. Another example of trust
being negatively impacted is evidenced by a different student's experience with a teacher regarding a personal matter that he thought was confidential between the two:

If I tell you something that I thought was going to be kept between me and you, and you still go tell my parents, it's like, "Buddy, what are you doing?" I'm just trying to get through my stuff. Like I told you I was going to get through it, and I told you I was going to be fine. You asked me, "Are you okay?" And I said, "yes," so calling my parents was a violation. (Terrance, Focus Group, October 2018)

Thus, the student's perspective of the school climate and culture is affected when the relational trust between student and teacher suffers a setback. The breakdown in trust and lack of support experienced by the student influences how he views the school community as a whole.

The following quotes from four different participants further demonstrate the effect that perceived issues with communication have on students’ perception of the school community and their associated place within it.

...he still doesn't give me what I need and help me as much as I ask. ...If you see them [students] trying to change I feel like you should try to help them instead of completely ignoring them. (Miguel, Focus Group, January 2019)

This student feels invisible because his needs are not being met, despite the fact that he has taken on a new attitude toward learning. It is frustrating for the student to find that the teacher does not recognize his efforts to change.

Sometimes I'll come into the classroom and my teacher starts arguing with me. I feel like if students don't yell back at the teacher, then teachers shouldn't yell, but should show respect towards students. ...if you show them respect, they should show respect back. (Andre, Focus Group, October 2018)
The student perceives the teacher’s interactions with him to be unfair since he had not been disrespectful in any way to the teacher, yet the teacher is demonstrating disrespect towards him. He finds the teacher’s actions unreasonable, and he is left confused.

He's the hardest teacher to have a talk with. Because anytime you try to do something nice for someone else, he'd always stop you for some unknown reason. He'd tell you to just come inside [the classroom], and possibly call the dean on you. (Xavier, Focus Group, October 2018)

This student does not understand the teacher’s reaction to his requests and he is not clear on how his concern for other students leads to a disciplinary call to the dean. This confusion can negatively impact future interactions with this student and his teacher. He outlines how he feels misunderstood by the teacher, and seeks clarity on the teacher’s rationale for contacting a dean.

This next student participant outlines an instance of teacher investment in his academic and social development and success:

If they feel like you don’t put effort into their class, they're not going to want to want to greet you when you're in the halls. They're just going to instinctively ignore you, not pay attention to you. (Antonio, Focus Group, January 2019)

This student reflects on his interactions with teachers outside the classroom in common areas. He associates a student’s effort level in class to a connection with teachers outside the classroom as well.

These passages highlight that even though respect may have not been fully established or sustained in certain classrooms with some teachers, students show a willingness and commitment to building it. For instance, students highlight in the above passages that their demonstrated effort in class should be recognized and addressed by
teachers. In addition, from my experience, mutual respect is an important foundational element that can lead to better understanding of behavioral expectations and academic needs. The students understand and value respect, and will work to rectify misunderstandings because they see the teacher-student relationship as a critical component to their success as students. These students discuss how, in a mutually respectful relationship, teachers should give students the benefit of the doubt when it comes to making a good faith effort to adjust maladaptive behaviors, as opposed to being passive aggressive or dismissive in their tone and exchanges.

An aspect of relationships, such as the existence of personal regard, relieves relational tensions that may arise to help students better connect with teachers. In the above instances, a breakdown in communication leads to teachers and students leaning on their default stances and making assumptions that result in disconnection. However, when teachers and students are aware of the correlation between students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy, instances of divergence and internal dissonance are more actively diminished. When teachers are more attuned to their students’ abilities and cultures, they are better able to create learning experiences that identify and address their students’ multifaceted needs. Raider-Roth, Albert, Bircann-Barkey, Gidseg, and Murray (2008) show that if teachers have not adequately learned the cultural demands that afford students success and future opportunities, then students will be at risk for school failure.

Multiple student participants expressed confusion about the lack of connection with some Black women teachers at the school. The students shared that these teachers
feel the need to hide their true identities while at work, and have their “guards up” to protect themselves from being mislabeled and misunderstood. As one student explained:

   We have one teacher who told us straight up, "In school, I have to be professional and act a certain way so people can take me seriously." But out of school, she is very open-minded. (Malik, Focus Group, December 2018)

This participant relates to the way this Black teacher feels and ultimately behaves in order to advance her career, demonstrate competence, and justify her worth as a Black woman professional in the field of education. This exchange between teacher and student shows that some have internalized that whiteness equates to exemplary professional practice, and acceptable behavior in the workplace does not always align with Black culture or other identities that may be central in the lives of some Black teachers. Dickens and Chavez (2017) posit that a combination of educational and professional obstacles, including racism and sexism, all exact psychological tolls on Black women. As a result, they often feel compelled to present to the world a different self or an image they perceive will be more acceptable to others. These changes in behavior by Black teachers influence how study participants understand issues of racism and can impact relationships students form with others and their own sense of belonging in the school community.

   And while certain students in the study may feel disconnected from some teachers, the following student participant’s account shows how he makes meaning of the depth of teacher-student relationships. He believes that a relational connection with teachers helps to mitigate the fear that they are not invested in student success, and provides a nudge to their learning process.

   But as far as my experiences, they [high school teachers] really do care, they really try to put all the effort that they can into your education and try to make
you realize that in life, you will need your education to get somewhere, to succeed.... and they want to see you grow up and be something. (Andre, Focus Group, October 2018)

As expressed by this study participant, his experiences with teachers have been positive, overall, and those instances have caused him to feel valued as a contributing member to the classroom and school community.

Relational complexities are revealed in the teacher-student interactions noted during these focus groups. Several noted exchanges between teachers and students and the perceptions of the boys of color in this study highlight that multiple, elusive factors play a role in how the school climate and culture is shaped and defined. It is often a challenge for students to separate their personal feelings about a teacher from class performance and the manner in which they view school, in general. Yet, a strong focus on supporting student learning by resisting disconnection and opening lines of communication to express both teacher and student needs are echoed by multiple participants. For example, one participant related:

If you're not going to put effort into your work because of past experiences with teachers, then they're not going to put effort into you because they know that other students actually would like to do what they're giving them. They're just going to not put effort into you, and just not care whether you're doing your work or not. (Marquis, Focus Group, January 2019)

Students realize the importance of a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties are actively working in the best interests of the other to improve outcomes for one another. Evidence of student responsibility, as noted in the remark above, shows a commitment on the part of the student to be reflective about complementary investments into teacher-student relationships, resulting in the advancement of the learning process, and better student outcomes and opportunities. The student’s reflection highlights that
when one of the parties is willing to take one step forward, then the other will respond in kind for the betterment of the classroom community and goals of learning. Teachers and students are able to work in tandem to actualize the learning and the quality of learning experiences to sustain an environment that maintains high expectations for all students across classes.

Based on observations that I conducted over the course of several months during the 2018-19 school year, I noted that when conversations or interactions between teacher and student took place in the corridors, they were usually initiated by the teacher. However, in the cafeteria and at after-school events, these conversations were started on the part of both teachers and students. I noted that both parties approach one another in the cafeteria to engage in conversations that appear to be positive in nature as evidenced by proximity between parties and their facial expressions. I recorded in my journal that teachers would reference students’ contributions in class during after-school events that demonstrate that teachers value students’ ideas and participation.

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of ninth-grade students and Black boys who responded to the 2017-18 annual school climate and culture district survey felt that they belonged at the school, were accepted by students and staff, and were understood by others. However, 33% of Latino boys reported not feeling like they belonged at the school, even though nearly 100% of the Latino boys do, in fact, feel accepted and understood by peers and adults. Circumstances and experiences that caused these Latino boys to feel alienated from their school community should be further researched to best address this problem. I was unable to pursue this line of inquiry due to
my sample size. Nearly all freshmen and subgroup respondents reported trying to understand how other people see things, work hard to challenge inequalities in society, and feel empowered to change those conditions, which speaks to the fact that our students see themselves as change agents with the will to right social wrongs.

The results of the survey, taken together with focus group data, demonstrate that varied perspectives do exist among boys of color on whether or not they feel a sense of belonging in the school community. The experiences and encounters participants have with teachers on a daily basis directly influence how they perceive teachers’ sense of student worth and student contributions to the class. While that perspective can be subjective, the general sense from the overall ninth-grade cohort shows a high percentage of students who feel connected to at least one adult in the school community, which is an element to making them academically successful.

**Theme B: Stereotype Threat and Racial Identity.** The manner in which a student racially identifies and the salience that race plays in their lives has an impact on how students behave and interact with others in the school community and is influenced by the threat or risk a student encounters based on a teacher’s implicit bias toward their racialized group. Both teachers and students alike experience tension between societal norms and school culture. The way in which one prefers to present themselves is evidenced in the following excerpts that show how evoked emotions are managed and how students navigate these particular issues. Participants further discuss stereotypes and rudimentary issues of race and gender that must be balanced throughout the course of their school day:
I feel like no one in high school is ever going to get too comfortable with themselves. It's just because everyone is going to have that exterior, that guard up, and I feel it's the same for teachers. You are always going to have that persona you put on in school. I have friends who behave different outside of school, so they can be seen in a different way. (Reggie, Focus Group, December 2018)

This young man’s perspective shows that the identities of students and teachers in school may vary drastically from how they actually identify outside of the school community. Because of physical identifiers, such as the color of one’s skin, the choice of clothing, the vernacular one chooses to use, or one’s gender and stature, boys of color must be consciously aware that others may be intimidated due to their implicit biases about a racialized group. The sense of duality that exists and the constant codeswitching that occurs for these boys stunts their authentic selves in a community that appears unsupportive at times. One boy explained it this way:

Well, they [White teachers], some of them understand, but most of the time, they don't. They are not comfortable with our behaviors. They see it as like crazy, you can just see it in their facial expressions. They're not used to it. They're probably thinking in their head that they have to act a certain way in order for them to be able to get taken seriously as a good teacher. They should just act like who they really are. (Malik, Focus Group, December 2018)

Based on the boys’ perspectives, some White teachers appear to lack cultural competence when they are out of touch with the social, cultural and linguistic needs of boys of color. These teachers cannot readily understand the behaviors this group exhibits, and struggle to broaden their comfort zones to build connections with these boys. If teachers were able to open their minds to different ways of being, then trust could begin to take shape that opens communication channels, allowing students and teachers to recode how they view and interact with others.
As part of the process to ensure the safety of students and staff in the building, all students and visitors are required to pass through a metal detector at the door and have their personal belongings searched. The following student comment references the manner in which some boys of color experience this entry ritual into school each day:

So they're [a particular group of boys of color] treated differently, like you know, I feel like they need to be checked and patted down when it comes to the buzzer and stuff, but all the teachers know us, they know the way we are. They know that we're not dangerous. So they don't treat us the way they treat them, in that we're smaller, we're more open and happy. But the other ones are like keep their hands in their pocket, have a hoodie on. You know, they come to school practically with the impression that "I'm trying to intimidate people, I'm trying to make people fear me." And we don't do that, we come to school being the same way we were yesterday. (Dante, Focus Group, December 2018)

These comments made by one of the boys of color, and seconded by another, show the perception of the impact that prejudice has on how one experiences interactions with others. According to the participant, one’s appearance, race, or mannerisms may lead to misinformed decisions and adverse interactions between student and teacher that could have a ripple effect on a community that reinforces stereotypes and creates factions. The notion of othering is also brought to bear in this reflection. The process of othering (Jensen, 2011) is observed in this student’s experience as he, a male student of color is put into a subordinate social category, and is marginalized based on his physical appearance because he does not fit into established social norms of the dominant group. It is sobering to witness the dichotomy that exists in this example, where some boys of color diligently work to decrease the level of discomfort felt by certain school community members, who view some boys of color as menaces to society and a threat to their mental and physical safety. The fact that boys of color reference a scenario in which they need to
walk into the community with their heads down calls for the implementation of more inclusive practices and a reshaping of how we view others.

Students in the focus groups detailed disappointment with their inability to connect with teachers with whom they share an affinity, which evidently decreases the sense of belonging they felt in the school community. For example, one explained:

And, all the Black teachers here all got attitudes. It's weird because they're the ones that you feel like, just by looking at them, you feel like you should be able to talk to them, but you can't talk to them because they have this guard up. (Andre, focus Group, October 2018)

As students grapple with finding their place as valued members of the community whose identities are affirmed, they seek to join a group that makes them feel accepted and comfortable with those who look like them or with whom they share an affinity. The lack of an instinctive connection between teachers and students of color came as a surprise to the boys in this study. They had thought that those relationships were guaranteed and organic in nature, simply based on the shared struggles both have endured. The student reflects on the dismay he feels with the lack of connection with other Black teachers because their shared kinship was understood by him to be sufficient to make a preliminary connection. However, the student further adds that he understands that the perceived arm’s length stance and mask that is worn in certain settings in order for the teacher to be viewed as competent and collegial in their work setting are critical to their professional success.
Students further discussed their perceptions of how boys of color are regarded by teachers in the community based on their outward appearance, mannerisms, and chosen vernacular. One told us:

They [boys of color] feel like they have to be tough, especially because you're Black. If they lived with a father, then you have to be all tough, and big and bad, and thinking you have to play sports. And that's just like the Black thing [to do]. You have to be strong. When people think of White people, they think quiet, calm, professional, and then when you think of Black, they're just ghetto. (Reggie, Focus Group, December 2018)

These comments shed light on the role that race plays in how boys of color, at least those in this particular study, compare themselves to their peers and the battle they experience by not fitting into dominant society’s norms. The social and academic terrain navigated by these students is not without obstacles; however, they are aware of factors that are in their purview of control and are less concerned about the image of them painted by society. They are experiencing a coming of age and are becoming more comfortable with their identities, and find support and solace in relationships with peers and some teachers. According to one student:

She, to me, is not perfect, but she's almost there because she knows how to take a joke. She supports all of her students, no matter what they are, and always gives them the benefit of the doubt. [But] the bad ones, she gives way too much benefit of the doubt. She's always going to have their backs. She's always going to be one-on-one with you, and you one-on-one with her. ... and that's not for her to be a pushover. Students have a lot on their plates, you know, but I just feel like you should be able to talk to teachers about almost anything without them judging you or something. (Malik, Focus Group, December 2018)

There is a clear tension expressed by this student as he demonstrates his understanding of the complexities that exist in relationships. He respects the fact that the teacher empathizes with external factors that impact behavior, mood, and performance in
the classroom, but he also expresses concern that the teacher overextends herself and, thus, is susceptible to being taken advantage of. Thus, a balancing act is experienced by students and teachers alike who are charged with sustaining a safe and welcoming school environment that values and affirms differences, despite experiences where the opposite has been true from the perspectives of these boys of color in this study. The students’ perspectives and experiences inform their own identities, as well as their behavior and decisions made throughout the school, which could have a bearing on how they view the school’s climate and culture.

Based on learning walks with other members of my leadership team across the school, I noticed various cultures and identities represented on bulletin boards, images of prominent figures of color displayed in classrooms, and several displays throughout the building that showcase the staff, allowing students to learn more about their teachers and what they like to do outside of school. These examples exhibit the welcoming culture that exists at my work site to promote school and self-pride, and increase connections to others in the community.

Black and Latino male respondents on the district climate and culture survey noted that their cultural identities are valued and affirmed at a greater percentage than the overall ninth-grade respondents. This perspective may be related to the fact that 51% of teachers at the school are people of color and that shared ethnic identity serves as a basis for trusting relationships (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2010; Kramer et al., 1996). Seventy-eight percent of the overall ninth-grade respondents agreed that bias-based conduct is actively prevented by various members of the school community, as compared to 94% of
Latino boys and 82% of Black boys. This fact leads me to wonder about the experiences of Latino boys compared to the entire grade and why a difference exists. I would be interested in pinpointing and understanding those interactions that shape their point of view on the topic. Stereotype threat may be less of an issue for the Latino boys, however, the Black boys in the groups were vocal about the impact of teacher bias on their treatment of and support for Black boys. However, that observation does not align with the survey data findings that 82% of Black boys agree with the statement about bias-based conduct at the school.

Theme C: Academic Press and Stress. Students in the study have faced stress, anxiety, and frustration in various learning environments throughout their high school experience, which has had an effect on their academic performance and access to opportunities. However, their ability to persevere through adversity and overcome self-doubt to press toward academic achievement, bolstered by stakeholder support and motivation, are characteristics that lay the groundwork for achievement and progress. In order to experience those academic gains, however, student participants outlined the importance of teachers taking the time to establish a relational connection prior to beginning a lesson. One student shared:

We have teachers, where we go in class, and they just start teaching. Like no. They are like, "Everyone sit down. I'm going to start teaching." They just start teaching like you understand what's going on. There’s no, "How was your weekend?" (Antonio, Focus Group, January 2019)

When teachers invest time in personally engaging with boys of color in this manner, students feel more welcomed in the class, are more receptive to learning, and can better retain information because they feel safe, thus freeing up working memory. Because
learning is a relational experience, it is best practice to remove barriers to success in order to allow students to feel connected to the teacher and content (Nieto, 2012).

There are instances described by boys in the group in which they voice frustration with the teacher for not empathizing with the fact that they struggle to understand the material in a meaningful way and, as opposed to remaining silent and deepening the gap, they see value in advocating for themselves to obtain the necessary support to succeed. One student related his reaction to his teacher’s words:

"If you don't wanna be here, you can leave because I'm trying to teach." No, you're not [teaching everyone]. And the reason why I'm not leaving is because I actually want to do my work. If he just slowed down and changed his teaching style, he could be a great teacher. (Reggie, Focus Group, December 2018)

The student in this example shows an investment in education to advance to the next stages of his academic journey. He struggles with the fact that the teacher exhibits unfair and misplaced anger and frustration towards him and feels guilty by association, but remains steadfast in the class in an attempt to understand the content. The mounting tension between teacher and student is an obstacle that could be avoided with better communication and mutual respect in the learning environment. It is a challenge for a student experiencing difficulty with academic material to learn with this level of stress in the classroom.

Furthermore, students discuss the futility of structures that currently exist when communication is strained in the classroom. They express their annoyance with the process that can be remedied through effective communication between teacher and student, and not by interference from an outside party who disrupts the learning process.
for everyone. The fact that the student is in a class that he does not enjoy further exacerbates the stress the student experiences as a result of this interruption. One student reported:

And he has a routine of just calling the office, calling the office, calling the office, instead of speaking to us, like “Hey, I need you to get onboard. I need you to do this, I need you to do that.” He just goes and clicks the button. It's annoying! It's like, “What was even the point of all of this? You just wasted your time and mine.” (Xavier, Focus Group, October 2018)

This student participant yearns for better communication in which the teacher effectively describes his needs related to student behaviors and work production so that the class is efficient with limited interruptions from the dean that serve no productive purpose. Both teachers and students appear to have the same goal of improving conditions related to teaching and learning in the school community and want to work to close the opportunity gap that exists within the school and across the district. Boys of color in the group feel that conditions could be greatly improved in classrooms if teachers established stronger connections with students and leveraged that relationship to demand more from students, while supporting them along their educational journeys.

Based on notes in my leadership journal, teachers across classrooms avail themselves to students during times that are mutually convenient so that students do not fall behind in their assignments. Some students take advantage of seeking additional help during Advisory time, lunch periods, or after school, when their needs extend beyond the in-class support that is offered. As staff at the school continue to develop a culture of scholarship through their messaging, expectations, and actions, students have shown a
strong willingness to make intentional adjustments to their attitudes and work habits that lead to their success.

An overwhelming majority of ninth-grade students recognized the importance of school and believe that grades and test scores are correlated with success in their futures, according to the 2017-18 district survey. This mindset introduces stress into students’ lives as they work hard to earn top grades to improve outcomes for themselves and their families. The willingness and urgency shown by these boys of color to capitalize on opportunities that the school offers are encouraging. Their responses demonstrate that school is a priority in their lives and is seen as a pathway to more favorable circumstances. Considering that school performance is important to boys of color, it is equally essential to ensure that a strong support network is in place to meet their unique needs. Eighty-six percent of the Black boys who responded to the survey noted that they could identify one adult in the building other than their teachers who is willing to help them with learning-related concerns, and 71% of students could go to an adult for social/emotional-related issues.

While there is a 15-percentage point variance on the survey results between an identified resource for social/emotional and academic needs, it is encouraging to note that the majority of these students feel that they have access to an adult to assist with their challenges. A notable point from this dataset is that both Black and Latino boys, 86% and 80%, respectively, are able to identify a trusted adult ally versus 67% for the entire ninth-grade population, when it comes to academic concerns. The survey data supports the experiences outlined during focus groups, as only 71% of Black boys and 67% of Latino
boys are able to identify a trusted adult ally for support with social/emotional concerns, which is less than the 75% as reported by all ninth-grade survey respondents. This means that while students may have expressed that teachers do not always address their needs in class, there is at least one other person in the school who they feel can meet those needs.

My analysis of these findings shows that, based on various scales of Cultural Relevance; Academic Stress; Support Staff; Sense of Belonging; Social Perspective Taking; and Civic Participation that overlay the three thematic codes identified, the responses from student subgroups and students overall are aligned, which underscores that students feel connected to the community of teachers and peers, feel challenged yet academically supported by the content, and feel valued as contributing members of the school and community at large. Daily jottings from my leadership journal bring additional context to data sources analyzed thus far, showing that students are provided with opportunities to play a vital role in shaping the climate and culture of the school through two primary mechanisms: holding membership on the Student Advisory Leadership Team (SALT), and by participating in restorative conversations during daily advisory blocks that are intended to strengthen community, increase communication, and improve relations between students and their peers, as well as teachers.

Students across grade levels participated in open dialogue with teachers and administrators to elicit ideas and provide feedback on the start of the school year as compared to the previous year. Students shared that they believed more programmatic opportunities should be offered that support their interests, such as after-school clubs. Many of our students do not reside in the neighborhood where the school is located and,
therefore, an after-school environment would be an ideal way to continue to build bridges across racial lines and communities in the city. Students also noted the importance of advisory block to connect with teachers about missing assignments and to seek clarity on topics with which they struggle. Many students have expressed a commitment to building community during open discussions and restorative practices at least once per month around topics of interest, led by their SALT peers.

Summary of Findings

Findings in this summary are presented in order of their importance to my school community based on data findings, beginning with stereotype threat. A duality was noted in the data where students were confronted with the reality of Black teachers presenting and comporting themselves in two seemingly different ways—one way at school that exudes professionalism and a sense of guardedness versus a lighthearted casualness that exists outside of school. The boys articulated that the manner in which students conduct themselves has a bearing on and sets a tone with teachers. This aligns with students’ consciousness of unfair and oftentimes unprompted consequences that result based on teachers’ stereotyping, where students are ‘put in a box’ and defined by behaviors perceived as problematic early on. Teachers’ discomfort with Black culture as perceived by these boys, including preconceived notions of the behavior that boys of color exhibit based on stereotypes, have had a negative impact on student-teacher relations from the lenses of these participants.

I found that mutual respect was a foundational element that students in this group need in order to exercise resilience in the classroom and capitalize on individual strengths.
as learners. This notion was evident in student comments that highlighted an absence of mutual respect that directly affected teacher-student relations in a negative manner.

Students also discussed a level of frustration or stress in the classroom where underlying academic gaps and a lack of support serve as barriers to success that impede academic press. Students with learning differences or challenges described instances in which they felt that teachers were not empathetic to their particular needs. Students expressed being physically present in the class but mentally absent, when struggling to make connections to the material, leading to teacher frustration—as interpreted by the boys.

Data from the 2017-18 district’s annual school climate and culture survey show some alignment with student reflections from the focus groups. Sample questions, along with the scale and percentage results from students of color as compared to the entire ninth-grade population, can be found in Appendix A. The percentage of Black and Latino boys who responded to the survey was approximately one-third of the ninth-grade survey respondents. It is important to note that a percentage majority of the results from this particular survey are favorable, indicating the health of the school climate and culture from these students’ perspectives. Despite isolated incidents and unique challenges that surfaced in the focus groups with certain teachers, when taken together, the two data sources demonstrate a supportive and engaging learning environment where students feel physically and emotionally safe, and are comfortable expressing their identities and ideas.

Finally, relationships outside the classroom with teachers are important and help students to better focus on tasks at hand when they feel connected with their peers and teachers. A critical takeaway from all data sources is the fact that students respect
teachers who listen and relate to them while suspending judgment, and work consistently to develop skills in all students that prepare them for life after high school, regardless of where they are from. A clear consonance is noted across the literature related to my study. When conditions exist for students to build and leverage social capital in their school community and develop relationships with their teachers, then they feel valued. Because learning is a social act, the quality of teacher-student relationships is important for the promotion of academic press, sense of belonging, and a tolerant community, leading to fewer instances of stereotype threats and microaggressions.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

You see when I extend my hand
and you do not shake it
Chop chop

When I say something and you do not like
the way it sounds
Chop chop

When I wear my pants a certain way
and it causes you to frown
Chop chop

When I read like I need help
and you blame it on me instead of helping me
Chop chop

When I make an adolescent mistake
in your presence and you cast me away
Chop chop

This excerpt from the poem Chop by Alfred Tatum emphasizes the effect that multiple microaggressions can have on the psyche and confidence of young Black and Latino males. These experiences are far too commonplace for boys of color, and cut away at the fiber of their being. With knowledge comes power, thus, this literary work may awaken a consciousness in its readers and help them reflect on their interactions with young men of color. Instead of chopping them down, edify them with affirmations, and value their identities to pave a path to better outcomes for this historically marginalized group.
The importance of incorporating student voice into academic discourse and school-based decision-making was actualized for me through this study. The richness and authenticity of the student participants’ experiences have had a profound impact on me, and will continue to inform my thinking as I strive to address the academic and social/emotional needs of my student population. The boys in the study have shared that they feel empowered as a result of this study experience, and they look forward to seeing how their ideas help the school community and its culture. The power of their words will impact professional learning for their teachers which reinforces the notion of students as holders of knowledge and experts on some matters, as well.

The centrality of relationships to the learning process of students and males, in particular, is emphasized through the stories and lived experiences communicated by participants in this study. The data I collected during my study were analyzed to further my understanding of the participants’ perspectives at my school site. My study created an opportunity for me to build more meaningful relationships with a level of intimacy that may not have otherwise existed in the ordinary course of school business. While a varied cross-section of the student population participated in this study, the sample size was small but, nonetheless, their stories represent experiences that add value to the strategic planning that follows this study. Although findings from the study cannot be generalized to the school’s population or other settings, it yielded rich data that allowed for important discourse to take place at the school level. This discourse is the fodder of school improvement and, through the process, I gained a more nuanced understanding of my work site through an iterative process of inquiry for continuous school improvement. With a focus on the three broad levers, stemming from relational trust as outlined in my
conceptual framework of academic press, sense of belonging, and stereotype threat, boys of color provided context on their daily social and academic interactions with teachers which revealed findings about their academic and emotional needs. Gathering and interpreting this data is essential to increase connectedness to the school community and improve their outcomes overall.

With this approach to research, instructional and organizational practices are meant to improve through a process of fact-finding and decision-making that is informed by data and feedback to meet the multifaceted needs of students, staff, and other constituents. Practitioner action research allowed me to take a fresh look at my school from the lens of an outsider with the aim of making the familiar strange. Through discoveries found in the data, consisting of close conversations with students that led to an analysis of their needs, initial conversations with teacher teams have started to take place, and some adjustments and decisions are being made to address the gaps that surfaced. Campbell (2013) posits that practitioner research emphasizes professional education that poses, not just answers, questions, interrogating one’s own and others’ practices and assumptions, and makes classrooms sites for inquiry—that is, learning how to teach and improve one’s teaching by collecting and analyzing the ‘data’ of one’s daily life in schools. The collection of varied perspectives on the school’s climate and culture, based on daily exchanges and interactions with teachers, helped me to better understand my setting and weigh the impact that teacher-student relationships have on the school community.
The process of practitioner action research at my work site helps me to place my school under study to measure the effectiveness of systems and structures, climate and culture, and instructional effectiveness using the lens of an outsider. Through continuous inquiry and reflection during meetings, observations, and feedback, I better understand how teachers and students interact—socially and academically—and can better determine the impact of individuals’ perception on the school community. Timely, ongoing feedback from students of color in the school will help shape future conversations and professional development that can shift the behaviors and attitudes of teachers and staff alike, which could lead to better future outcomes for all students.

The school emphasizes three pillars to promote a safe and welcoming learning environment, yet conditions for effective teaching cannot thrive without a positive school climate and culture. The health of the school’s culture, as measured by elements of mutual respect, trust, and relationships amongst stakeholders, was evident to me through data collected during focus groups and survey results. I observed an example of climate health through students sharing small talk with teachers in common areas during transition times. These teacher-student exchanges are important to unpack, considering that those interactions may not usually be initiated by teachers. This discovery led to conversations with school staff during weekly meetings to address the importance of building community. Through those discussions, a campaign was launched with a focus on being kind to everyone in the school with a concentration on our similarities, not our differences. Students were encouraged to have lunch with others that they typically would not converse with and to simply greet one another in the corridor as an acknowledgment of their presence. Furthermore, using the results of the findings noted
during focus groups and the analysis of survey result data, interventions were developed, instituted, and observed as part of an ongoing, reflective process of cycles of inquiry to improve conditions and outcomes for students, including an increase in restorative practices during Advisory blocks.

Through this process, I have seen evidence that students are eager to share their best thinking on matters that apply to them and their peers as well. More opportunities to provide a stage for students to take a leadership role in shaping school climate and culture aids in their level of buy-in and their pride in the community. The development of student voices in this process of inquiry and reform engages them in finding feasible solutions that work for their particular community, as noted by Mitra (2006). I plan to invest in a more formalized process to obtain ongoing, timely data from students in order to continuously inform decisions, which will lead to a stronger community that values student voices. Explicit changes made to the school by school leaders that are seen and measured by students, based on their input, are investments into deeper, more meaningful community ties and stakeholder relationships, as underscored by Mitra (2006).

I found that the boys in the study lifted up stereotype threats based on the fact that instances of prejudgment and typecasting, based solely on race and outward appearances by various adults in the school community, are a constant challenge they face and weighs on their ability to perform academically. This challenge sheds light on the importance of affinity groupings to buffer such experiences and build solidarity and strength within a trusted cohort of like-minded individuals in order to overcome such bias while navigating the academic landscape. I am hopeful that with ongoing conversations about issues of
race and related stereotypes, my school community will reach a place of awareness that changes mindsets and expands outlooks on interactions with others. A commitment to more inclusive practices in a setting that values and affirms the backgrounds of others will serve as a safeguard against disconnection and a scaffold for increasing students’ sense of belonging.

The data presented in the findings demonstrate that the pump is primed for further development of restorative practices. This will allow for widening channels of communication between all members of the community to address issues that impede student growth and progress, such as lack of relational trust that directly affects academic press and sense of belonging. The responsibility to ensure that these conditions become a part of the everyday culture at the school rests on the shoulders of many, from administrators factoring time into the professional development calendar to provide training for teachers, to teachers leading conversations during structured and unstructured times, to students demonstrating a willingness to engage in transparent, difficult conversations, and finally, to parents to reinforce these behaviors at home. It takes a village to raise a child, and it begins with empowering each stakeholder to play an active part in building a positive climate and culture for all students.

**Implications and Recommendations for School Leaders**

While the intent of this study was to better understand the setting in which I work through practitioner action research, and not to generalize findings to broader populations, the data reveal important student insights and feedback that is applicable and beneficial across multiple settings. I recommend that schools incorporate more student
voices into existing structures that impact school climate and culture. This can be achieved through student leadership opportunities on the school’s governing board in addition to regular open lunches with the principal, and by providing other opportunities where students can communicate directly with school leaders. In this manner, students will gain an understanding of school oversight and accountability, as well as operational and academic processes and protocols, to more actively and routinely contribute to conversations about school improvement. Student participants brought the importance of matters, such as identifying at least one adult in the building to connect with beyond academics to the fore, however, code-switching and maintaining an arm’s length distance were obstacles that detracted from those relationships. In addition, once trust erodes in a teacher-student relationship, it is often a challenge to rebound from that setback. Secondary emotional support mechanisms should be in place to address those needs, as they arise. Study participants communicated the impact that stereotyping has on their ability to perform academically and on their capacity to see themselves as a part of the school community, lessening their sense of belonging.

**Professional development.** Effective teacher interaction with students that support and affirm their identities is critical. In addition, encouraging two-way dialogue that leads to a sound relationship with trust and integrity is integral to success in the classroom. Dedicating time and space to provide that training is critical for improving teacher-student relations and students’ perspectives on school climate and culture. A series of professional development that supports teachers’ inquiry into issues of race and gender identities, along with effective teaching and learning strategies and their intersectionality, could address the needs that surfaced during the focus groups. Also,
raising teachers’ awareness of stereotype threats would be crucial to helping shift mindsets on our daily interactions with boys of color. Steele (1997) recommends the following interventions to be implemented in school environments to decrease stereotype threat and increase academic performance:

- Optimistic teacher-student relationships
- Challenge over remediation
- Stressing the expandability of intelligence
- Affirming domain belongingness
- Valuing multiple perspectives
- Role models
- Nonjudgmental responsiveness
- Building self-efficacy (pp. 624-625)

In that same vein, leveraging a social/emotional curriculum with an emphasis on strengthening student skill sets that target effective communication and relationship building would empower students to reduce their feelings of self-doubt related to stereotype threats and employ action-oriented vocabulary that serves to build bridges, diminish differences, and check biases during advisory blocks.

**Onboarding and mentoring.** Because students transfer into open enrollment high schools at various points throughout the school year, the establishment of a formalized onboarding process would help new students to more quickly acclimate to the school environment by becoming familiar with the school’s existing policies and procedures, offerings, opportunities to get involved in the community, and connect with
fellow peers and teachers. A strength assessment upon intake would allow teachers to have a broader understanding of the student as a learner and person, and more seamlessly navigate issues that may arise with imperfect or incomplete student information. In addition to onboarding, a mentoring program or buddy system could connect the transfer student to an upperclassman student leader who would also assist in breaking down barriers to entry and ease feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and fear.

**Ongoing solicitation of student feedback.** Findings from my study demonstrated that students are willing to share their viewpoints on their place within the school’s ecosystem and other matters as they relate to school culture. As it stands at some schools, students have limited opportunities to engage in discourse that leads to sustainable change and decision-making. Therefore, a process to strengthen student voices and input through regular, ongoing conversations with key individuals in the school to gather ideas and gauge their perspectives on school climate and culture would lead to more timely, actionable decisions that benefit all students. By gathering more insight from students, changes that have been implemented could be measured for effectiveness and course corrections could be made based on student-informed perspectives as they experience school life.

**Implications for Scholarly Research**

This study contributes to existing literature that focuses on relational trust in schools. Much of the existing research is centered on the primary school level; the impact that relational trust has on the experiences of boys of color in secondary school and their perceptions of school climate and culture has not been studied beyond its impact on
student behaviors and resulting discipline referrals. More in-depth studies related to high school students and relational trust would add to and lend a deeper understanding of the existing body of literature. This addition to the literature would address the role that relational trust plays in the lived experiences of students, and develop the literature for high school students of color in particular. In addition, I suggest that research that seeks to know more about the differentiated experiences of Black and Latino males in high school be further explored.

Practitioner action research gave me the opportunity to inspect my school site with a fresh perspective to make informed changes to the community based on various inputs, particularly the strength of student voices. Oftentimes, we may act in the best interest of the students we serve without considering their opinions, ideas, and dreams, which reinforces our place of power and privilege. While the intent or desire may be guided by good intentions, students must see themselves in the decisions that impact them directly. By lending their voices to the decisions that impact them, historically marginalized groups of students would be empowered and stereotypes about the level of investment from boys of color could be transformed to contributing members of their school community.

**Longitudinal study - Measure changes with this group over multiple years.**

Participants in this study were interviewed during the fall of their sophomore year, after recently completing the ninth grade at the study site. Their stories were centered around three themes as outlined in the conceptual framework graphic in Chapter 2. While the students’ lived experiences were unique, commonalities were found in those interactions.
that shaped how the boys viewed their school climate and culture, despite differences in their ages. As noted, the participants’ ages ranged from 15 to 18 years although all were classified as tenth graders. A longitudinal study would provide key data on whether or not the perceptions of the boys in this study change over the course of four years at the high school. Findings from this multi-year study would allow for a deeper analysis into factors that facilitate or impede success in the classroom, based on the depth and breadth of student-teacher relationships.

**Female students of color and their voice.** While this study focused on bringing the stories of boys of color to the surface, I believe it is equally important to gather the lived experiences of female students of color as well to determine whether these two groups internalize teacher interactions in the same manner. Their stories will be of interest to understand the manner in which they navigate issues related to the three thematic codes of relational trust and sense of belonging; stereotype threat and racial identity; and academic press and stress. A process of comparing and contrasting stories between genders would be important to analyze. Distinct needs of each group would provide critical information to school leaders that would inform decision-making at the school level in order to include specific interventions that address identified academic and/or social/emotional needs. Staffing decisions, including adding support staff to facilitate affinity groups, transition teams, counselors, and mentors, would be made based on findings from both gender-specific groups.

**A case for implementation of teacher voices.** A study that captures the lived experiences of teachers and measures their perspectives on school climate and culture
with a relational trust lens would be interesting to conduct as well. In fact, important disconnects and discontinuity with the student data could emerge, that would provide provocative information for discussion. The data collected for the study could be compared against student perceptions in the same community. In this way, a more holistic view of the health of the school’s climate and culture could be obtained, and the data could be used to make structural changes in systems and protocols to improve conditions for all members of the community. Discoveries could yield data that supports professional development opportunities for teachers focused on the importance of identifying and managing implicit biases that impact teacher-student interactions. In addition, teachers would better understand the role that relationships play in a well-managed, safe classroom environment that affirms students’ cultures.

Limitations of the Study

Anderson et al. (2007) note that a study’s trustworthiness involves the demonstration that the researcher’s interpretations of the data are credible or ring true to those who provided the data and that multiple data sources have been compared or triangulated. With that in mind, I was certain to observe and analyze student data in an objective manner, with the familiar being strange, to allow for the authentic story to emerge. My findings of the data were based on the themes that emerged across data sources, rather than my own assumptions or expectations. For example, I was surprised when the student participants expressed a distant feeling towards their Black teachers when I thought that connection would have been easily established based on a shared affinity.
The triangulation of focus group data, survey data, and my journal notes contributed to that understanding, so that my assumptions or expectations of what I thought I would find were left at bay. I was able to maintain my objectivity throughout the process of data analysis by focusing intently on the experiences of the young men in my study without allowing my existing student relationships to cloud my understanding of the stories that were shared. I refrained from making connections and/or drawing conclusions that were not evident in the data, and I also ensured that the data were true to the actual stories that students illuminated through multiple member checks.

**Looking forward**

My study has indicated the value of seeking out student perspectives to better understand my school community and to help improve conditions for all constituents. The perceptions of boys of color on their school experience and the impact that has on school climate and culture were of particular importance to bring their voices into the discourse on school reform. Similar studies could be extended across the other 34 public high schools in the district, which could potentially yield more generalizable data about teacher-student relationships, surface best practices and limitations across the system, and suggest new practices to remedy disconnections to improve overall school and district performance.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: School Climate and Culture District Survey Analysis

Table 4

Students of Color Percentage Results for 2017-18 Annual School Climate and Culture District Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Statement Text</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>9th Grade Black male student responses</th>
<th>9th Grade Latino male student responses</th>
<th>All 9th grade student responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My teachers support me in my cultural identity, and encourage me to talk freely about differences and inequalities and their impact on my learning.</td>
<td>Cultural Relevance</td>
<td>82% Agree</td>
<td>80% Agree</td>
<td>80% Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators, teachers and staff actively try to prevent bias-based conduct.</td>
<td>Cultural Relevance</td>
<td>82% Agree</td>
<td>94% Agree</td>
<td>78% Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how important is school to you?</td>
<td>Value of Learning</td>
<td>100% at least Quite important</td>
<td>100% at least Quite important</td>
<td>95% at least Quite important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much do you think that your grades and test scores will determine your future?</td>
<td>Academic Stress</td>
<td>100% at least Quite a bit</td>
<td>94% at least Quite a bit</td>
<td>95% at least Quite a bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are hurt, sad, or just need to talk to someone, is there an adult at school other than your teacher you can go to?</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>71% at least Often</td>
<td>67% at least Often</td>
<td>75% at least Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you need help learning something, is there an adult at school</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>86% at least Often</td>
<td>80% at least Often</td>
<td>67% at least Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>Social perspective taking</td>
<td>Civic participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>80% at least</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least Quite a bit</td>
<td>Quite a bit</td>
<td>94% at least</td>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of belonging</td>
<td>67% at least</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>94% at least</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of belonging at least quite a bit</td>
<td>Quite a bit</td>
<td>87% at least</td>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>how connected do you feel to the adults at your school?</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>78% at least</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least quite understood</td>
<td>quite understood</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of belonging at least quite a bit</td>
<td>87% at least</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do people at your school understand you?</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>100% at least</td>
<td>80% at least</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least quite a bit</td>
<td>quite a bit</td>
<td>94% at least</td>
<td>somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of belonging at least quite a bit</td>
<td>67% at least</td>
<td>87% at least</td>
<td>somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often is it to you to take action when something in society needs changing?</td>
<td>78% at least</td>
<td>90% at least</td>
<td>86% at least</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least somewhat important</td>
<td>somewhat important</td>
<td>93% at least</td>
<td>somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic participation at least somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Civic participation at least somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic participation at least somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

other than your teacher who can work with you?

At your school, how accepted do you feel by other students?

How well do people at your school understand you?

How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?

In general, how often do you try to understand how other people see things?

How important is it to you to actively challenge inequalities in society?

How often is it to you to take action when something in society needs changing?
### APPENDIX B: Deductive Codes

Table 5

*Deductive Codes with Associated Definitions and Frequency.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Frequency of Instances from Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Personal Regard</td>
<td>Teachers’ concern for students outside of the classroom setting. Actions on both ends of the relationship are made in an effort to reduce others’ sense of vulnerability.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Competence</td>
<td>Ability of an individual’s to achieve outcomes successfully based on their responsibilities.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Respect</td>
<td>With full attention, listening to others during discourse across the school community that has a bearing on future actions and interactions.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Trust: Integrity</td>
<td>Consistency between what a person says and does. Others believe and perceive that a moral-ethical perspective guides one’s work.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Connectedness</td>
<td>The sense of connection one feels to the school community as a contributing member.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Self Efficacy</td>
<td>One’s efficacy level based on his/her sense of belonging and value in the school community.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: High Expectations</td>
<td>A student’s ability to maintain high expectations of themselves based on the perspective of the level of expectations teachers have for them in the school community.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Student Responsibility</td>
<td>The ability of students to take responsibility for their actions and decisions based on their sense of belonging in the community.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging: Perseverance</td>
<td>Students’ ability to persevere in the face of adversity and obstacles is reliant on their sense of belonging in the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype Threat/Racial Identity</td>
<td>The threat or risk a student encounters based on a teacher’s implicit bias of them. The manner in which students identify themselves in terms of race, and its impact on how the student behaves and interacts with others in the school community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: Original Focus Group Questions

1. Think of a teacher that you really like, and who understands you well. Tell me about that specific teacher, and the specific behaviors or attributes that make you believe they understand you.
2. Think about a class where you participate a lot. What makes you want to speak and participate actively?
3. Describe what the teacher does in classes where you get engaged and feel you are really learning.
4. Describe a time when you feel you were stereotyped or that another student was stereotyped, or you were required to read something in which you thought the characters were stereotypes. How did you respond? Provide a specific example of a teacher or teachers that have shown they care about your contributions to class, participation, and success.
5. Tell me about a time when a teacher really supported your ideas.
6. Tell me about interactions with teachers in common areas like the hallways, cafeteria, and assemblies.
7. Describe a teacher who has changed your work habits. What did s/he do that led to the change in your habits?
8. Tell me about a time that a teacher included your ideas in classroom discussion or in the curriculum or school decisions?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding relationships you have with teachers?
10. Or do you have any additional feedback or questions regarding anything we have discussed here today?
APPENDIX D: Revised Focus Group Questions

1. Describe your general experience as a Black male student at your school.
2. Describe the things that make you feel most connected to your school.
3. Describe what causes you the most stress at school.
4. Describe what causes you to feel really good/happy at school.
5. How do teachers/administrators/peers help you feel supported at school?
6. How do the relationships with your teachers affect your mood, academic performance, attendance, if at all?
7. What motivates you to want to do well at school?
8. How do teachers demonstrate their feelings or belief in you and your abilities?
APPENDIX E: Annual School Climate and Culture District Survey

The following 70 questions/statements are randomized when administered to students.

1. How often are students unkind to each other at this school?
2. How often are students at this school unkind to each other online?
3. How much bullying occurs at this school?
4. In your classes, how often do you see people like you represented in what you study?
5. In your classes, how often do you see many different kinds of people represented in what you study?
6. How valued do you think all students' home cultures and languages are in the school curriculum?
7. How valued do you think your home culture and language are in the school curriculum?
8. How excited are you about going to this class?
9. Overall, how interested are you in this class?
10. How often do you get so focused on class activities that you lose track of time?
11. How often do you try to think of more than one explanation for why someone else acted as they did?
12. Overall, how often do you try to understand the point of view of other people?
13. How often do you try to figure out what motivates others to behave as they do?
14. In general, how often do you try to understand how other people see things?
15. How much do you believe that being concerned with national, state, and local issues is everyone's responsibility?
16. How important is it to you to get involved in improving your community?
17. How important is it to you to actively challenge inequalities in society?
18. How important is it to you to take action when something in society needs changing?
19. How much do you think you can change your own intelligence?
20. How much do you think that being bad at math is something you can change?
21. How much do you think that struggling as a writer is something you can change?
22. How much do you think that trying hard to learn something means you're bad at it?
23. If your friends or family wanted to go to an art museum, how interested would you be in going?
24. If your friends or family wanted to go hear people play music, how interested would you be in going?
25. If your friends or family wanted to go to a play, how interested would you be in going?
26. Overall, how much have you learned from your teacher?
27. Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?
28. At your school, how accepted do you feel by the other students?
29. How well do people at your school understand you?
30. How much respect do students in your school show you?
31. How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?
32. How often do you worry about violence at your school?
33. How often do students get into physical fights at your school?
34. Overall, how safe do you feel at school?
35. How often do you feel like you might be harmed by someone at school?
36. Overall, how important is school to you?
37. How curious are you to learn more about things you talked about in school?
38. How much do you enjoy learning in school?
39. How much do you see yourself as a learner?
40. How much does your school work make you feel stressed?
41. When you take a test, how nervous do you feel about doing well?
42. How much do you think that your grades and test scores will determine your future?
43. When you are hurt, sad, or just need to talk to someone, is there an adult at school other than your teacher you can go to?
44. When you need help learning something, is there an adult at school other than your teacher who can work with you?
45. If you face a problem while working towards an important goal, how well can you keep working?
46. How important is it to you to finish things you start?
47. How confident are you that you can remain focused on what you are doing, even when there are distractions?
48. If you fail to reach an important goal, how likely are you to try again?
49. In a typical week, how much time do you spend in creative arts instruction or activities?
50. On a regular day at school, how often do you feel relaxed?
51. How often are you enthusiastic at school?
52. On a normal day in school, how confident do you feel?
53. On a normal day in school, how much are you able to concentrate?
54. When your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] asks how you are doing, how often do you feel that he/she is really interested in your answer?
55. How interested is your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] in what you do outside of class?
56. If you walked into class upset, how concerned would your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] be?
57. If you came back to visit class three years from now, how excited would your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] be to see you?
58. If you had something on your mind, how carefully would your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] listen to you?
59. How much does your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] encourage you to do your best?
60. When you feel like giving up on a difficult task, how likely is it that your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] will help you keep trying?

61. How often does your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] ask you to explain your answers?

62. How often does your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] take time to make sure you understand the material?

63. Overall, how much have you learned from your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher]?

64. For this class, how clearly does your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] present the information that you need to learn?

65. When you need extra help, how good is your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] at giving you that help?

66. How well can your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] tell whether or not you understand a topic?

67. How interesting does your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] make the things you are learning?

68. How good is your [Field-MathTeacher][Field-ScienceTeacher][Field-EnglishTeacher][Field-SocialTeacher] at helping you learn?

69. "My teachers support me in my cultural identity, and encourage me to talk freely about differences and inequalities and their impact on my learning."

70. "Administrators, teachers and staff actively try to prevent bias-based conduct."
APPENDIX F: Consent Form

IN SCHOOL WE TRUST: THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF A SUBGROUP OF BOYS OF COLOR AT A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

Invitation to Participate

TITLE OF STUDY: In School We Trust: The Social and Academic Experiences of a Subgroup of Boys of Color at a Public High School

INVESTIGATOR: Renee McCall

CONTACT INFORMATION: rmccall@gse.upenn.edu

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am conducting a dissertation study currently entitled In School We Trust: The Social and Academic Experiences of a Subgroup of Boys of Color at a Public High School. The study will help me complete my requirements for the Doctor of Education Leadership degree at the University of Pennsylvania. I would like to invite your child to participate in this study, and would greatly appreciate your contribution to this very important research project.

The purpose of my study is to understand the academic and social experiences of boys of color who recently completed grade 9 at Central High School in Boston. The study will provide a way for students to share their views on how they experience interactions with teachers at the school, and determine how best to provide future students with the academic and social supports needed while they are students at Excel.

Your child’s participation would include the following:

1. An in-person focus group for approximately 60 minutes held at the school. During this focus group, he will be asked a series of questions about his academic and social experiences at Excel. The purpose of the interview is to learn as much as possible about what students like about their learning experiences and ideas they have for making things better. The interview will also explore how their social experiences have played a role in their time at their school.

2. An in-person 30-minute follow-up interview may be added shortly after the focus group to help clarify anything that was unclear. Your child’s identity will be protected from the possibility of identification by using a code name or pseudonym for his name, and the interviews will be conducted privately with just the student and me during Advisory block. During the interview process, the responses will be recorded and typed into my personal computer which is password protected; thus, only I will have access to the information shared by your student.
3. A list of the interview questions can be provided in advance upon request. The total time of participation for your child will be about 2 hours.

4. At the conclusion of the study, all materials from it, including typed transcripts and individual student information, will be destroyed.

In addition to the interview, a review of your child’s educational records will be conducted. This will be done prior to the interview with your child. The academic records will help me to better understand your child’s academic needs. Specifically, this review may include the following:

1. Transcripts, to include current and historical grades
2. Individual Education Plan (IEP), if applicable
3. Attendance data
4. Discipline data

Since these documents will be reviewed as part of the study, it is my responsibility to inform you that you have the right under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to review any of these documents before, during, or after the interview process. Additionally, if you do not want me to review these documents as it relates to your son, please inform me of that decision.

Your child’s participation in this research is strictly voluntary. At any time, your son or you may decide to discontinue with the process. Participation in this study will not be used to modify the placement status of your child, enhance or reduce their academic achievement, or provide him with an unfair advantage over students that select not to participate. There is no financial compensation for participating.

Participation in this study has very little risk to your son. The risks of participating are that your son may share information or recall a negative experience at school that may have caused him to have an emotional reaction. If he shares that he would like to speak with a member of the support staff at the school (counselor, social worker, psychologist, or nurse), that will be offered during and after the interview. The benefits of participating in this study are that the information shared from your son could serve as a guide in improving not only his experience at Central, but that of others in the future.

In order to participate in this study, you and your child must sign below.

Participant (student) Signature _______________________________
Printed name ________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature ____________________________________
Printed name ________________________________________________
Date _______________________________________________________

I greatly appreciate your giving time to this study, which will help inform the next generation of leaders in their efforts to address these very important issues.
Should you have any questions regarding this research or research participant rights, please contact the supervisor of this study:

Dr. Eva Gold
Educational Consultant
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
Email: evagold47@gmail.com

In case of a research-related injury, please contact the IRB department at University of Pennsylvania at 215-573-2540.

Should you have any questions during the study, and would like to speak with me directly, I can via email at rmccall@gse.upenn.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Respectfully,
Renee McCall
Principal, Central High School
Doctoral Candidate
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
IRB Protocol #8
REFERENCES


Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (n.d.). Measuring and improving teacher-student interactions in PK-12 settings to enhance students’ learning. Curry School of Education Students’ Learning, Charlottesville, VA.


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