

# Who Really Cares?

## The Disenfranchisement of African American Males in PreK-12 Schools: A Critical Race Theory Perspective

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**Background/Context:** *Despite recent gains from a number of students in U.S. schools, African American males continue to underachieve on most academic indices. Despite various interventions that have attempted to transform the perennial disenfranchisement, their school failure has persisted. Conversely, their failure in schools frequently results in poor quality of life options.*

**Purpose/Objective/Focus of Study:** *The objective of this study was to use critical race theory as a paradigmatic lens to examine the schooling experiences of African American males in PreK-12 schools. The focus of the study was to shed light on how African American males believe race and racism play as factors in their schooling experiences.*

**Research Design:** *The article includes qualitative data from a case study of African American males who offer counterstorytelling accounts of their schooling experiences. This article also explores the utility and appropriateness of critical race theory as a methodological tool to examine and disrupt the disenfranchisement of African American males in U.S. public schools.*

**Findings/Results:** *The results from this study revealed that the participants were keenly aware of how race shaped the manner in which they were viewed by their teachers and school administrators. The data also revealed how the participants explicitly fought to eradicate negative racial stereotypes held about African American males. Finally, the use of counterstorytelling within a critical race theory framework seemed to provide the participants a platform to discuss race-related issues in a manner that many of the participants felt was lacking in their school environments.*

***Conclusion/Recommendations:** The findings from this study reveal some of the difficult obstacles that many African American males seek to overcome in order to become academically successful. Moreover, the findings suggest that educators must become more conscious of the role that race and racism plays in their schooling environments. Furthermore, educational researchers who are concerned with disrupting school failures of students of color and from low-income backgrounds should consider conceptual and methodological frames that place race, class, and gender at the center of their analysis.*

In his noted 1992 work, “Faces at the Bottom of the Well”, legal scholar Derek Bell describes a fictitious story about a group of “Space Traders” who have arrived in the United States. In this most intriguing account of extraterrestrial invaders landing on the Earth’s shores, Bell describes a scenario in which this group of space traders have come equipped with natural resources, special environmental cleaning chemicals, money, gold, and other commodities that are desperately needed for a financially- and natural resource-strapped United States. The traders are willing to provide these items to the U.S. government in exchange for all of its African American citizens, who would be taken to an unknown location. Bell’s “Space Traders” story is fascinating because he walks readers through a two week travail of the agonizing debate in which governmental leaders and the American public engage around a central question: What is the worth of African Americans in the United States? Bell’s work is mentioned here, because over a decade plus after his story of the Space Traders, the question may very well loom for education practitioners, researchers, and scholars around a group of students whose value and worth seem to be called into question every day in schools across the United States, and who is the focus of this work—African American males.

One of the subtexts to Bell’s story about the Space Traders is, who would really care if African Americans no longer existed in this country? Would there be an uproar and mass protest about their removal? Or would there be silence and indifference from many citizens that would send a strong message of complicity and agreement with the decision? Again, Bell’s work is mentioned here to use as a backdrop to delve into a hypothetical, yet seemingly real conundrum facing the field of educational research: how would educational researchers and scholars react if a particular group of students no longer existed? What if there were a group of students whose educational prospects and life chances seemed in such dire straits that their viability as a group was in serious question? How would the educational research community react? Would there be a strong call for funding and research to probe potential interventions and

solutions to stem the tide of hopelessness for this group? Would we seek new paradigms that might provide the needed insight into helping improve the schooling experiences and ultimately the quality of life of this group? Or would the disenfranchisement of this group be greeted with a loud silence that would seem to convey a general lack of concern about their education and life prospects? These questions are raised because a close examination of the current state of education for African American males in PreK-12 schools reveals that these students' underachievement and disenfranchisement in schools and society seem to be reaching pandemic and life threatening proportions.

One of the disturbing realities about the plight of African American males in PreK-12 schools has been the relative silence from the educational community at large, and the educational research community in particular. While an increasing number of African American scholars have addressed this issue (Brown & Davis, 2000; Foster & Peele, 1999, Garibaldi, 1992; Fashola, 2003; Hopkins, 1997; Noguera, 2001; Polite, 1993a; Polite & Davis, 1999), it would appear as though others have accepted this widespread failure as business as usual, thus echoing an old phrase from Marvin Gaye's famed song, *Save the Children*, in which he asks the poignant question about the fate of our children, "Who really cares?"

The present paper examines the underachievement and disenfranchisement of African American males in PreK-12 schools using critical race theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework to interrogate their disenfranchisement. CRT is a lens that enables a discourse about race, class, and gender to be the centerpiece for an analysis of African American male underachievement. This particular analytic lens acknowledges the presence and perniciousness of racism, discrimination and hegemony, and enables various cultural and racial frames of reference to guide research questions, influence the methods of collecting and analyzing data, and to inform how findings can be interpreted. A number of scholars have argued about the value of race-based epistemologies and methodological approaches for educational research (Delgado, 1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Race-based epistemological approaches are important analytic lenses, particularly within qualitative research, because they offer the opportunity to challenge dominant ideology, provide transdisciplinary modes of inquiry, and suggest a space for insider accounts of their experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Equally important is that theoretical approaches such as CRT seek to illuminate the voices of individuals that have been historically silenced in educational research, thus providing a counterscript to mainstream accounts of their realities (Tillman, 2002).

## THE STATE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN PREK-12 SCHOOLS

The academic achievement of African American males in PreK-12 schools has been the subject of a growing number of scholarly works over the past two and a half decades (Brown & Davis, 2000; Davis, 2003; Franklin, 1991; Gibbs, 1988; Hopkins, 1997; Madhubuti, 1990; Noguera, 1996; Polite & Davis, 1999; Polite, 1994; Price, 2000). Much of this work has been concerned with the identification of informative research, effective strategies, and critical concepts that seek to address two concerns: (1) reasons that explain the persistent underachievement of African American males in U.S. schools and society; and (2) potential interventions that can help improve the educational aspirations and life chances of African American males. This research has been much needed given the troublesome state of many African American males in PreK-12 schools. A multitude of statistics underscores the severity and persistence of the academic underachievement of many African American males. Consider the National Center for Education Statistics data over the past decade which reveals that a majority of African American males in the fourth, eighth and twelfth grades did not reach grade level proficiency in key subject areas such as reading, mathematics, history, and science. In addition, less than one-quarter of African American males were at or above grade level in these same subject matter areas. Furthermore, fewer than 3% of African American males performed at advanced levels in these areas, which would make them eligible for Gifted and Talented or Advanced Placement courses, which are important gatekeepers for post-secondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

A 2006 report issued by the Schott Foundation of Education revealed startling statistics in a national report card titled, "Public Education and Black Male Students." The report found that during the 2003-2004 school year 55% of African American males did not receive diplomas with their classmates four years after beginning high school. A number of states scored worse than the national average. For example, Florida and Nevada failed to graduate a third of their Black male students. Seven states (Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, South Carolina and Wisconsin) failed to graduate more than the national average for Black males. Furthermore, the study found that Black males who dropped out of school were heavily concentrated in those cities, such as New York, Detroit and Chicago, that failed to graduate between three quarters and two thirds of their African American males. The report's authors state that they studied African American males because "as a group, the cumulative consequences of school failure are most severe for

this group of students. . .and to understand that this enormity of school failure has created a rip tide of negative results for Black male students and society as a whole” (p. 2).

A preponderance of evidence shows that academic underachievement exists for many African American males in PreK-12 schools; however, challenges exist socially and emotionally for them as well. Consider the fact that African American males currently make up approximately 7% of the nation’s PreK-12 student population, yet they make up a disproportionate percentage of students who are in special education, alternative schools, and remedial classrooms (Office of Civil Rights, 2000). This overrepresentation is most present in the classification of students with high-incidence disabilities; namely, mental retardation, learning disabilities, and serious emotional disturbances (Yates, 1998). These categories require a high degree of professional judgment for consensus, however, and in many ways could be interpreted subjectively with different outcomes depending on the cultural competence of the assessor.

The school failures of African American males not only have implications for them in PreK-12 schools and higher education, but more disturbingly, the widespread failure has a direct correlation with the quality of life they face after an unsuccessful school experience. There is an increasing correlation between African American males who perform poorly in school, many of whom ultimately drop out, and their subsequent involvement in the penal system. According to 2005 Bureau of Justice statistics, African American males outnumber all other ethnic groups of the prison population, and have a rate of incarceration that is five times higher than the rate of White males. Moreover, one in every eight African American men in their 20s and 30s was behind bars in 2003 (Elsner, 2004), and Department of Justice statisticians project that based on current demographics one in every three African American men can expect to spend time either incarcerated, on probation, or under some type of jurisdiction of the penal system during his lifetime.

Longitudinal research done by the U.S. Bureau of Justice and the Justice Policy Institute revealed that in 1980, 463,700 African American men were enrolled in higher education compared to 143,000 who were incarcerated. By 2004, the study found that 758,400 African American men were enrolled in colleges across the U.S. compared to approximately 924,000 who were in the nation’s jails and prisons. The Justice Policy Institute estimates that over this twenty-four year period, for every one African American male who entered college or a university, three entered jail or prison. In California, African American males are five times more likely to go to prison than enter one of the colleges in the

state's university system (Conover, 2000), and in Illinois there were 10,000 more African American men in prison than in college. Even today, such staggering numbers paint a sobering reality which suggests that a young African American male who starts kindergarten in the fall of 2006 has a better chance of finding himself under the supervision of the penal system or being incarcerated than enrolling in a college or university twelve years later. To quote Alan Elsner (2004), who has done extensive work examining the crisis in the United States prison system, "For many young black men, prison is their college" (p.13).

#### THE NEED FOR NEW PARADIGMS IN RESEARCH FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

Much of the recent research that has been concerned with African American males has sought to counter the stereotype of their being inherently undereducated, underemployed, criminalminded, oversexed, and pathological in nature (Davis, 1994; Gordon, 1996, 1997; Noguera, 1996; Price, 2000). These works have provided alternative portrayals of African American males that disrupt the hegemonic notion that they are socially and academically deviant. Furthermore, these works have sought to identify frameworks that will allow more African American males to reach their full potential. I share similar concerns of previous scholars in identifying important variables of the problems facing African Americans in general, but more importantly I am concerned with identifying meaningful interventions and useful research paradigms that offer ways to improve the educational experience for African American males.

As a researcher, I am interested in more probing and critical theoretical frameworks that will invite a more penetrating analysis of the dismal state of affairs for many African American males in PreK-12 schools. As an African American male scholar who has endured the challenges that scores of young Black men face from pre-school through post-secondary education and beyond, I am seeking to identify a theoretical framework that enables researchers to ask, "How does race and racism influence the current state of affairs for young Black men in PreK-12 schools?" I am in search of a theoretical framework that does not have to "make the case" or "explain beyond a reasonable doubt" how and why race matters in the schooling experiences of African American males, but that accepts race and racism as integral parts of life in the United States. Equally important, as a father of three young Black males, this troubling state of affairs has not only professional interest to me, but sets forth real, personal, and tangible issues that I, and scores of other parents of young African

American males face on a daily basis as we seek to identify and implement protective and nurturing strategies to enable our sons to experience school and society in a manner similar to that of their non-Black peers.

## DOES RACE STILL MATTER?

Some may ask, “How do we know that race plays a factor in examining the disenfranchisement of African American males?” It goes without stating that important issues such as class, gender, home and community environments, parental education and involvement, disabilities, language, ethnicity, and culture all play important roles in access to education in this country. However, race still remains one of the least understood, yet most provocative and divisive elements of our society. Cornell West (2004) reminds us that race still matters and is “America’s most explosive issue and most difficult dilemma” (p. 1). Our failure to honestly and critically examine race and all of its manifestations in many ways has only led to further tension, discrimination, and hostility along racial lines. James Baldwin often referred to the “rage of the disesteemed” that would occur if the United States did not acknowledge the destructive roles that race and racism have played in this country. According to Balfour (2002), Baldwin argued that the U.S. is guilty of:

a willful ignorance, a resistance to facing the horrors of the American past and present and their implications for the future. This unwillingness to confront these horrors accounts for the resistance of racial injustices to remedy by formal, legal measures. For innocence sustains a mind-set that can accommodate both an earnest commitment to the principles of equal rights and freedom regardless of race and a tacit acceptance of racial division and inequality as normal. (p. 27)

This is one reason why race still matters and must be a central aspect of any discussion that is concerned with racial inequities, because as a country, and as a community of researchers we have yet to engage one another in an authentic, honest, and sustained dialogue about race and racism. Our failure to engage in this most important dialogue about race, racism, power and all of their manifestations significantly limits the manner in which various individuals can talk about their experiences in these United States. This failure also prevents us from hearing and empathizing with the pain, frustration, and deep seated anger that resides in the hearts and minds of many U.S. citizens, particularly our young people, because they have been told that race is unimportant. Yet, in so many

ways they find their experiences and opportunities being shaped largely by issues of race. Our failure to engage in a conversation about race and to suggest that we now reside in a colorblind society is problematic and potentially destructive (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Tatum, 1997). Such shortcomings only further silence the voices of those on the margins who continually seek inclusion in schools and society. Thus, a theoretical framework centered squarely on the salience of race, racism, and power, and the education of racially diverse students in this country would allow us to have a conversation that is desperately needed, most certain to be uncomfortable, and long overdue.

Why such a critical focus on African American males? Beyond the wide range of statistics which reveal their social, educational, political, and economic disenfranchisement in this country, there are democratic reasons why this examination is necessary. If the U.S. is to hold true to its democratic creed of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, do we as social scientists have the privilege to sit idly while a large group of our citizenry continues to be excluded from these core aspects of society? As educational researchers whose goals and aims are as David Larabee (2003) states to “make sense of the socially complex, variable rich, and context-specific character of education” (p.14), how can we not engage in meaningful dialogues and critical inquiry about severely disenfranchised groups? Gary Orfield (2004) posits, “When we see a problem as a serious threat, we don’t wait until we have scientific proof about the solutions. We start experiments and try to figure out what works and how to refine our efforts” (p. 9).

If one of our tasks as scientific researchers is to improve education through scholarly inquiry for the public good, it is essential that our work deal with those populations who have not benefited from the good that the public has to offer. While the focus of this work is on African American males, equal concern should be given to a plethora of other ethnic groups who continue to underachieve in U.S. schools. Latino students, the nation’s largest non-White group, in particular underachieve at a level comparable to many African American students. These startling figures are most prevalent with Mexican American students in the western and southwestern United States and Puerto Rican students in the northeast, wherein the majority of them are below grade level proficiency in reading, math, and science (NCES, 2005). Despite the prevailing construction about Asian Americans being high achievers, a close examination of the achievement of Hmong students in the Midwestern part of the U.S., as well as other southeast Asian students, namely Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Taiwanese students in pockets of the west coast and the midwest, reveals that their school performances are far from



acceptable, and deplorable in many circumstances (Allen & Nee, 2003). These disturbing educational trends affecting large numbers of students of color require researchers to probe into the salience of race as a factor in school achievement.

I propose using CRT as a theoretical framework for examining the educational experiences of African American males because race has been, and remains by and large undertheorized in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Race is also a topic that individuals frequently avoid when discussing the experience of life in the U.S. Cornel West (2004) states "To confront the role of race and empire is to grapple with what we would like to avoid, but we avoid that confrontation at the risk of our democratic maturation" (p. 41). The failure on the part of researchers to critically examine the role that race plays in the pursuit of an equitable education may reveal insights into why previous measures have had limited effectiveness for marginalized student populations.

An explicit acknowledgement of race and racism in educational theory and practice may contribute to a unique analysis and a richer, more comprehensive explanation of the educational challenges facing African American males who, perhaps more than any other student population in the United States, may be most negatively affected by distorted constructions of race and gender. As a result, these students are the victims of detrimental racial politics which play out in many U.S. schools. It is also necessary to recognize that race and racism have been and remain central cultural and structural forms of oppression that permeate every social, economic, and political institution in the U.S. Thus, unpacking its historical legacy and its contemporary remnants for all citizens is critical. This unpacking has obvious implications for the victims of racial oppression and inequity because many of them have experienced schooling in a manner that has had negative consequences for them, and educational researchers can play an important role in examining these circumstances in order to improve their educational and life chances. Equally important, however, is for this examination to inform those who have been benefactors of racial privilege to recognize their connivance in a social order that has produced institutional structures and ideological paradigms that have directly and indirectly contributed to the disenfranchisement of various groups in this country.

## CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Initially developed primarily by scholars of color who were concerned with challenging racial orthodoxy in the legal arena, critical race theory emerged from the field of critical legal studies (Delgado, 1995; Matsuda,

Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). CRT was a response to the slow pace of racial reform in the United States in the post-civil rights movement era, and the emergence of neo-conservative policies of the 1980s (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). According to Delgado & Stefancic (2000), the CRT movement is a “collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 2). Critical legal studies also criticized mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of American society as a fair and just meritocracy that seeks to legitimate and maintain existing institutional arrangements (Crenshaw, et al., 1995).

One of the basic tenets of CRT is the normalcy and permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). Critical race theorists assert that racism is and has been an integral feature of American life, law, and culture, and any attempt to eradicate racial inequities has to be centered on the socio-historical legacy of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). It is through this lens of race and all of its manifestations that CRT is able to pose this challenge to racial oppression and subjugation in legal, institutional, and educational domains. A central part of this analysis is the notion of Whiteness as property, wherein historically the law has been used as the primary vehicle to protect the interests and rights of Whites over the rights of persons of color. Thus, CRT interrogates the positionality and privilege of being White in the U.S., and seeks to challenge ideas such as meritocracy, fairness, and objectivity in a society that has a legacy of racial discrimination and exclusion.

CRT within education is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that attempts to disrupt race and racism in education (Solorzano, 1998). It enables scholars to ask the important question of what racism has to do with inequities in education in unique ways. CRT examines racial inequities in educational achievement in a more probing manner than multicultural education, critical theory, or achievement gap theorists by centering the discussion of inequality within the context of racism (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2003). CRT within education also serves as a framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999).

Critical race theorists in education anchor their interrogation of racism in four primary ways: (1) by theorizing about race along with other forms of subordination and the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in school curriculum; (2) by challenging dominant ideologies that call for objectivity and neutrality in educational research (CRT posits that notions of neutrality typically serve

to camouflage the interests and ideology of dominant groups in the U.S., and that they should be challenged and dismantled. Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that “there are well-developed systems of knowledge, or epistemologies, that stand in contrast to the dominant Euro-American epistemology.” (p. 258)); (3) by offering counterstorytelling as a liberatory and credible methodological tool in examining racial oppression; counterstorytelling has a long and rich history in communities of color that has utilized oral means of conveying stories and struggles that are often overlooked by those in positions of power, and it draws explicitly on experiential knowledge; and (4) by incorporating transdisciplinary knowledge from women’s studies and ethnic studies to better understand various manifestations of discrimination (Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

CRT has the potential to enable a discourse to take place in the educational research community that has occurred in Black homes, neighborhoods, churches, barber shops, and communal gatherings for years. Amongst scores of Black men, this dialogue, or the counterstory, has occurred within school locker rooms, on street corners, and in basketball gyms. It is a conversation that this research community should hear as we continue to seek interventions for complex problems in educational research, theory, and practice. The inclusion of a CRT framework is warranted in education when one considers the perennial underachievement of African American males in U.S. schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996, 1998, 2000). The severity and persistence of underachievement for African American males and other non-White students in U.S. schools leads critical race theorists to ask the question, “What’s race got to do with it?” (Parker & Lynn, 2002). This is a question that we as an educational research community have failed to engage on a large scale, but when we listen to certain voices on the margins, they would suggest that “race has a lot to do with it.” It is this viewpoint that we must allow to be a part of our data sources, methodologies, and analyses; and CRT can be a useful lens to better understand these omitted voices and viewpoints.

CRT provides a suitable framework because it not only centers race at the core of its analysis, but it also recognizes other forms of oppression, namely class and gender, which have important implications for African American males as well. Parker (1998) argues that:

The critical centering of race (together with social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other areas of difference) at the locations where the research is conducted and discussions are held

can serve as a major link between fully understanding the historical vestiges of discrimination and the present-day racial manifestations of that discrimination. (Parker, 1998, p. 46)

The intersections of race and gender have manifested themselves in a multitude of complex and harmful ways within U.S. society. Grant and Sleeter (1986) argue that there needs to be further analysis of the intersection of race, class, and gender in student academic achievement and social adjustment. Moreover, they argue that the failure to examine the complexity of race, class, and gender intersections may lead to oversimplification of theory and the perpetuation of bias about groups based on single areas of identity. The “intersectionality” of race, class, and gender for African Americans is necessary in the analysis of what Collins (2004) refers to as Black Sexual Politics. She defines Black Sexual Politics as a theoretical framework which views race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age as mutually constructing systems of power. Furthermore, she maintains that this intersectionality permeates all social relations in society, and has particular ramifications for African Americans. Collins maintains that “developing an intersectional analysis of Black sexual politics has tangible political ramifications for anti-racist scholarship and activism” (p. 11). She also suggests that this contemporary and complex mix of race, gender, and class must be mindful of the “new racism” apparent in the United States. She asserts that globalization, transnationalism, hegemonic ideology, and mass media have created an environment where “Black youth are at risk, and, in many places, they have become identified as problems to their nation, to their local environments, to Black communities, and to themselves” (p. 54). Therefore, it is important to identify specific locations, practices, and paradigms where this “new racism” manifests itself.

It is important to delve into the constructs of race and gender for African American males for several reasons. First, the exclusive use of race in the analysis of African American males does not set their realities apart from the experiences of African American females, and other racial minorities. Although there has been research that has chronicled the experiences of African American females (Paul, 2003) and other racially diverse students (Lee, 1996; Moll, 1996; Pang & Cheng, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999), one could argue that there does not seem to be the same degree of exclusion and disenfranchisement from schools for these groups as there is for African American males. An analysis of African American males strictly through a gendered lens does not allow race to be examined. While there is extensive research that examines the social,

emotional, and educational challenges that males of all ethnic groups face in schools, there is a clear racial hierarchy amongst those groups that requires examining. The race and gender nexus is important because individuals wear multiple identities that are typically shaped by both race and gender in all of their manifestations. More importantly, the social construction of these identities plays out in unique ways that have critical implications for racial and gender minorities, in particular for African American males. Anne Ferguson (2001) writes:

Sex is a powerful marker of difference as well as race. While the concept of intersecting social categories is a useful analytical device for formulating this convergence, in reality we presume to know each other instantly in a coherent, apparently seamless way. We do not experience individuals as bearers of separate identities as gendered and then raced or vice versa, but both at once. The two are inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representation of subjects and the experience of subjectivity. (p. 22-23)

A conceptual framework with an explicit examination of the ways that race and racism manifest themselves and their juxtaposition with gender in education may offer new analysis into the underachievement of African American males, and provide new insight and direction for reversing their school achievement. Moreover, an introspection of what it means to be Black and male in the pursuit of education in the United States is critical given many of the distorted racial and gender norms that frequently offer narrow constructions of each group (Davis, 2003). All too often African American males have been caught in a web of stereotyped notions of race and gender that place them at considerable disadvantages in schools and ultimately society. The mere exploration of the social construction of the Black male image in the U.S. over the last four centuries reveals a highly problematic depiction ranging from the docile or the bewildered slave, to the hyper-sexed brute, to the gregarious Sambo, the exploitative pimp or slickster, to the super athlete and entertainer. The social and political ramifications of each of these images still influence the perceptions of scores of young Black men today, including through their own perpetuation of these images. These characteristics all contribute to what Hutchison (1994) has referred to as the "assassination of the Black male image" and undoubtedly plays a role in the racial and gender politics that play out in schools across the country.

## COUNTERSTORYTELLING AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL TO RECONCEPTUALIZE RESEARCH WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

One of the central tenets of CRT that can have important implications for educational research concerning African American males and other marginalized populations is the importance of counterstorytelling and narrative theory as a methodological tool (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The idea of counterstorytelling and the inclusion of narratives as a mode of inquiry offer a methodology grounded in the particulars of the social realities and lived experiences of racialized victims (Matsuda, 1993). Delgado (1999) refers to counterstorytelling as a method of telling stories of individuals whose experiences have not been told, and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse. Given the troubling state of affairs experienced by an increasing number of African American males in PreK-12 schools, paradigms must be created which will allow their voices to shed light on the day-to-day realities in schools and challenge mainstream accounts of their experiences.

One of the glaring absences of much of the research associated with African American males is that it has not included first-hand, detailed accounts from African American males about the roles that they believe power, race, and racism play in their educational experiences. It is the value of experiential knowledge that may offer important opportunities for new research paradigms, particularly those centered on the manifestations of race and racism. The use of narrative and storytelling offers what Tillman (2002) refers to as “culturally sensitive research approaches” for African American students. Tillman describes these approaches as “interpretive paradigms that offer greater possibilities for the use of alternative frameworks, co-constructions of multiple realities and experiences, and knowledge that can lead to improved educational opportunities for African Americans” (p.5). According to Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2003), CRT “view[s] experiential knowledge as a strength, they draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family history, biographies, [and] parables” (p.22).

A small number of works have documented African American students’ perspectives of their learning environments (Howard, 2001; Lee, 1999; Noguera, 2003; Price, 2000; Waxman & Huang, 1997), but even fewer have used CRT or comparable theoretical frameworks to examine how African American males interpret their schooling experiences. To

highlight examples of how such work is critical and informative, consider the work of Duncan and Jackson (2002) that uses a post-critical approach to examine the schooling inequities of African American males at a mid-western high school. Informed by a theoretical framework that was mindful of various ethical and moral considerations in the schooling of Black males, their post-critical approach sought to “privilege the voice of those who bear the brunt of inequalities in schools and grant them an opportunity to inform the analytic and conceptual categories we bring to our research” (p. 3). Furthermore, Duncan and Jackson state that they used an approach that went beyond traditional critical analyses and one that “privileges the subjective ontological categories that inhere the language of the students. . .” Thus, centering the voices of young Black males and their accounts of schooling, this study highlights the political nature of language in schools, and how African American males make sense of schooling in an environment that many of them felt was inherently unjust. This work offers useful ways to practitioners and researchers who seek to understand choices that many Black males make in their schooling process.

In another example of scholars using a CRT lens to critique the schooling experiences of African American males in U.S. schools, Watts and Erevelles (2004) used internal colony theory to expand the scope of CRT’s critique of racism. Watts and Erevelles maintain that internal colony theory as a theoretical framework offers a different insight into the existing literature on African American and Latino males that blames them for violence in U.S. schools and labels them as “natural born killers” (p.284). Moreover, they assert that internal colonization explains how “colonizing education is both violent and oppressive because of its psychological impact on the colonized, who have had to struggle against the illusion that every one is operating under a fair but competitive market” (p.284). Borrowing from the works of Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon, Watts and Erevelles suggest that African American males, as a racially oppressed population in schools, begin to “imitate the behaviors and attitudes of their oppressors” (p. 287), and their outward expressions of violence and resistance in schools are not the real problem, but the racist practices and ideologies that are institutionalized and normalized within school, but which “are not recognized as violent or dangerous because they are so normalized”, need to be examined if authentic possibilities for such troubled groups are to be identified.

Another example of the use of CRT as a methodological tool to shed light on the experience of African American students’ is highlighted in DeCuir and Dixson’s (2004) examination of the racial climate at Wells Academy, a private school located in a predominately White, affluent

southeastern city. Employing a CRT analysis of African American students' experience at the elite school, DeCuir and Dixson use a counterstorytelling approach to uncover the persistent and subtle acts of racism that students experience at their school with regularity. Moreover, the analysis of this work is instrumental in documenting the normalcy in which racism occurs. The African American students at Wells elaborate on the tacit and explicit acceptance of racism by school teachers and administrators by stating that school staff "aren't that surprised that it is there" (p.26). This work is critical in highlighting the pervasiveness and normalcy of racism, in addition to the Whiteness as Property principle, which among other things sanctions the exclusion of perspectives and ideologies that are not consistent with a Whiteness paradigm.

### COUNTERSTORYTELLING FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

To provide an additional account of counterstorytelling, I spent the past year documenting the experiences of African American males in an attempt to allow them to shed light on their experiences in schools. As part of an ongoing study, two hundred African American middle and high school males were surveyed about their schooling experiences, and potential roles that race may play in them. A subsample of this larger group was interviewed to gather a more in-depth analysis of their perceptions and experiences of schools. Ten African American males who were part of this smaller sample, and who were middle or high school students during the 2005-2006 academic year, serve as the participants for this work. The young men whose counterstories are offered here represented five different schools in a large metropolitan area on the west coast of the United States. Part of this study was to investigate the young men's experiences within different social class school settings. Therefore, five of the young men attended schools in urban, primarily low-income areas that were made up largely of African American and Latino students. The other five participants attended more racially mixed schools located in suburban communities, which were predominately White and middle class.

One of the central themes to emerge across each of the stories offered by the young men was their keen awareness of negative racial stereotypes about African American men. Critical to each of these young men, were explicit attempts to not reinforce widely held beliefs and stereotypes about African American males. Most of the young men in this study attributed much of their academic success to their desire to challenge negative stereotypes about young Black males. Many of the young men discussed peers they knew who were incarcerated at some point, made



bad choices, or had dropped out of school; and these students had a strong desire to not follow a similar path. I probed their thoughts about the choices many young Black males make, and why they felt it was critical not to reinforce these stereotypes about Black males. Jawan, one of the respondents offered this commentary:

I always have to think “What are they thinking about me?” If they think I am going to gang bang, rap, and act stupid, then I just work on doing the opposite. So when they see me on the honor roll, they seemed surprised, and I just trip off that.

Several of the young men talked about the perception that is held about young Black males in schools, and how they try to disrupt these beliefs. Jelani commented:

I play football, so you know they expect you to be good in sports. But when you are on the ASB (Associated Student Body) council, like I am, and being a school leader, have good grades, and talking about going to college on an academic scholarship, then they look at you like Whoa!! I didn't think that they (Black males) were into those kind of things. One teacher even told me once, “You're not like the rest of them.” I didn't ask her what that meant, but believe me, I knew what that meant.

The accounts provided by the young men from this work would serve as stories that provide an account of young Black males rarely shared in the educational discourse. DeCuir and Dixon (2003) assert that “The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses. . . . serving as a means for giving voices to marginalized groups” (p. 27). While several of the young men who attended predominately White schools discussed the manner in which they felt like they were viewed by White peers and teachers, several of the respondents at the predominately African American schools also discussed the importance of shattering stereotypes. As Christopher stated:

It's hard, because so many of us (Black males) are messing up at this school, and I know the teachers look at us like, “Why should we care, when they don't?” And I work hard to let them know that not all of us are messing up. A lot of us are doing homework every day, studying, working hard, so that we can improve ourselves.

Most of the young men stated that they believed that race was frequently a factor in how they were dealt with by their teachers and school administrators. Rodney stated that “teachers never let you forget that you are Black.” Akbar, a middle school student maintained that being Black at his predominately White school was difficult because “the minute something goes wrong at the school, the first people that get looked at are all the Black boys, and it ain’t even that many of us around here. You just get tired of that.” A similar sentiment was provided by Richard who was a high school senior during the year of the study, when he stated:

I watch it all the time. One of us (Black males) do something, and we get suspended or expelled. A White kid does the exact same thing, and he gets a warning, or an after school referral. Sometimes it’s so obvious that they treat us different than them.

Essential to the power of counterstorytelling are the insidious accounts of discrimination or racism that many of the respondents stated occur at their schools with regularity. Vann discussed an example that occurs in his racially mixed school when he commented that:

Mr. Paulsen [An English teacher] will have White or Asian kids who talk in class by challenging stuff in the book, or disagreeing with some of the readings, and he says that they are being ‘critical thinkers’ and he praises them for that, but each time I say something that I disagree or don’t like something we’ve read, he says I am being disrespectful, or I don’t understand the text. Why are they critical thinkers, but I am disrespectful?

In examining each of these works it is imperative to recognize that African American males discussed and defined their own realities on their terms. The young men were the center of these analyses based on their own interpretations of their experiences, and were offered frameworks that allowed them to critique schools as institutions and the people within them. Moreover, each of these works did not solicit or invite its participants to provide “safe” or politically correct responses. To underscore the salience of using CRT as a methodological tool to glean insights from African American males about their learning environments, future research must give credence to the power and insight that comes from them naming, describing, and analyzing their own realities. New paradigms must also be cognizant of how insider or cultural knowledge, which is an essential part of qualitative research, can be revealed through first person accounts of reality. Moreover, appropriate theoretical frameworks are necessary for race specific research because these frameworks are critical in identifying relevant concepts and constructs to guide the

research, where race and racism are concerned; they also offer specific questions to be queried, methods of analysis, and means of interpreting the findings (Merriam, 1998).

At least two of the young men challenged the nature of how students were assessed, and how access to a quality education, along with race, may play a factor in that process. Kenji stated:

I mean think about it. We have this exit exam now, and a lot of kids are not passing it. I passed it after the third time I took it. But when I first took [it] I was like, “none of this stuff, we never were taught” so how can you test us on it now? The only way I passed was that my Dad got me a tutor. But what about the kids who can’t afford a tutor? They are not gone’ pass, and it’s not because they are dumb, it’s because they haven’t been taught that stuff at this school.

Greg, another high school student was more explicit about the racial disadvantages stated:

I mean. . .look at this school. You have to go through metal detectors just to get in. Half the teachers don’t care. Just walk in their classes and you can tell. In my Geometry class, we had subs the whole year. How can you have a school, and you don’t even have teachers to teach the kids? I mean, come on now. I think that we are Black and poor have a lot to do with it. Show me where they have a school with White kids that have it like we have it. You can’t prove that it’s racism, but how can it be anything else?

Consequently, as researchers seek to identify useful interventions for improving the educational opportunities for African American males, they must be mindful that insider perspectives may provide different and often more condemning accounts about the schooling process than mainstream versions.

To highlight other examples of research concerned with African American males’ perceptions of their schooling environments, Noguera’s (2003) research found that African American males had vastly different experiences in schools than their White counterparts. He discovered that the overwhelming majority of African American males believed that education was important, and they had strong desires to attend college, however, they were the group least likely to believe that teachers cared about them and their learning. Noguera posits that the hostile and non-sup-

portive feelings that African American males experience in schools merit an examination into structural and cultural explanations of how identity is constructed within racial and gender terms for African American males. Needless to say, in light of the various portrayals of African American males through mainstream media, researchers could be informed by the myriad of factors that African American males employ in constructing their identities and inquire as to whether or not these factors could be manipulated in order to create more positive and self-sustaining identities.

### IDENTIFYING RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS THROUGH COUNTERSTORYTELLING

What must be clear as researchers examine the role that race and racism play in the educational experiences of many African American males is that the manifestations of individual and institutional racism are not always blatant, overt, and easy to observe. Frequently, acts of racism in schools are innocent, subtle, and transparent, but harmful nonetheless. Solorzano (1998) has discussed using CRT as a theoretical framework to uncover racial microaggressions that frequently affect students of color. Solorzano cites Chester Pierce's (1974) work on racial microaggressions wherein he describes them as "The chief vehicle for pro-racist behavior . . . These are subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges that are put-downs of blacks by offenders" (p. 66). Other scholars have written about the insidious nature of racial microaggressions and a pressing need to uncover them. Davis (1989) defines microaggressions as "stunning acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (p. 1576). For African American males, racial microaggressions from classroom teachers can manifest themselves in numerous ways.

Justin, a high school senior provided an account of these subtle, yet harmful put downs that students may feel:

We had an assembly at school for all the seniors who were going to college. They had the students come up on stage and said what college they were going to. For whatever reason, they forgot to call me up during the assembly, so I asked Mr. Matthews (the assistant principal) after the assembly why I didn't get called up, and he said that they were only calling up the kids who were going to 'good colleges,' and they didn't think that Morehouse was a really good college. That was like a slap in the face to me. Morehouse is a good college. I'm one of the first kids to go to

college in my family, and he says that, it is not a good school. How does that make me feel?

Future research centered in a CRT framework involving African American males could question if and how racial microaggressions are present in low teacher expectations for African American males, suspicion or surprise about their academic success, common acceptance of their underachievement, lack of positive re-enforcement for their accomplishments, differential forms of punishment, demeaning comments, failure to place them in leadership positions and reluctance to refer them for advanced classes. In short, racial microaggressions are tantamount to what Joyce King (1991) refers to as dysconscious racism: “An uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting existing order of things as given” (p. 135). To reinforce this point, Richard offered his experience with taking an AP class on the first day at his new school:

On the first day in class, I showed up a little late to this AP Chemistry class. The teacher said, “You must be in the wrong class, this is AP Chemistry.” I said, “No, I am in the right class,” and showed her my schedule. She looked at it, and said, “this must be wrong, you cannot be in here.” She didn’t even know me, but she assumed that I didn’t belong in her class. She called down to the office, and took about fifteen minutes calling down to the placement center, talking to counselors and everything, and when it was all over, I was in the right class. Am saying, if I was Asian would she have gone through all of that?

As many African American males attempt to come to grip with racial microaggressions which may be present in school policies, curricular programs, and teacher practices, researchers can play a vital role by providing non-threatening platforms that allow them to offer uninhibited descriptions of these instances, which vary from the dominant script about them, their performance, and their potential. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that the concept of the differend is much needed in critical research. They state that the differend occurs when the pursuit of justice is complicated by two competing explanations from various positions. The differend helps explain the value of narratives from marginalized persons and allows them to tell their stories and offer a counterscript to the dominant paradigm. In her work *Yearning*, bell hooks (1990) talks critically about the dangers of White interpretations of the Black experience and the mainstream’s suspicion of the Black experi-

ence as told by Black people. Kristopher, a middle school student stated that he had to attend a different school because of a fight he had with a White peer:

We got into this fight. I said he started it, he said I started it, but the principal believed him. I had never been in trouble at school before, and this kid got in trouble a lot. But I am the one who got kicked out, and he stayed at the school. They said that I was 'too hostile and aggressive', and I never caused trouble, but it was like they didn't want to hear nothing me and my mother had to say.

Counterstorytelling or the differend gives agency to African American males to offer narratives which can counter much of the rhetorical accounts of their identities that frequently describe them as culturally and socially deficient, uneducated, unmotivated, prone to violence, and anti-intellectual. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) counterstorytelling can serve as a cure for silencing those who have been the targets of racial discrimination. They state:

Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence, or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination; once named, it can be combated. If race is not real or objective, but constructed, racism and prejudice should be capable of deconstruction. (p.43)

If race and racism are social constructs that can be deconstructed, particularly within the context of education, educators must be informed by reliable research that documents where, how, and why race-related problems persist in schools. Researchers should be careful to not underestimate the ability of African American males, or any other group of students, to name their experiences or question the veracity of their accounts, or to dismiss their notions of how their schooling experiences can be improved. One of the enamoring aspects of this work has been the young men's surprise about someone wanting to hear about their experiences. This was best summed up by one of the high school participants:

I'm kinda shocked that you are asking us about this kinda stuff, because we never get asked about racism and stuff. Because you just assume that nobody's gonna believe you when you tell them about it. But this stuff is real. I was tellin' one of my friends about

the stuff we were talking about, and they were like, “where is he (The interviewer) ? Can we talk to him too? Cause we got some stuff to tell him too.” It’s like a lot of dudes got a lot of stuff they want to get off their chest. You know it’s like being in the desert and everybody’s thirsty, and you bring a big thing of cold water, everybody runs to get some. You being here, just asking about this stuff makes a lot of dudes want to talk to you about what they go through. The way we get talked to, they way teachers treat you, the stuff they want you to learn, I mean I could go on and on.

A deconstruction of race and racism has to take into account new realities, different voices, and the uncovering of silenced viewpoints. One of the criticisms made of CRT and the idea of counterstorytelling and narrative theory as a methodological tool is its perceived lack of analytical rigor and objectivity, and the ability to verify or confirm the accuracy of the accounts offered by the victims (Farber & Sherry, 1997; Posner, 1997). Some scholars believe that the stories may be intentionally atypical in order to garner greater attention and sympathy for the victims. At least one account from a middle school participant seemed to offer a retort to this claim:

I talk to my cousin who goes to Countrywood (another suburban middle school), and he tells me the same kinda stuff that happens to us [Black males] there. First to get blamed, surprised when you do good in school, expect that you are good in sports. It’s like different school, same stuff. It seems like we get it no matter where we are.

To combat this criticism of atypical stories, one must acknowledge the permanence of storytelling from the dominant paradigm when it comes to ideas such as meritocracy, democracy, and equality: ideas and concepts that many citizens in this country believe are just that—ideas and concepts, not realized ways of life. Thus, from a CRT perspective, the notion of storytelling comes down to what Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2003) state, “At issue is the question of what counts as truth and who gets to decide” (p. 249). The critics also contest how representative these accounts are of all members of the group, or what Rosen (1996) refers to as “vulgar racial essentialism.” Although CRT situates race at the center of its analysis, it recognizes the fluidity and multifaceted nature of identity for all individuals, and does not attempt to create monolithic constructions or experiences of any group. All theoretical frameworks have their share of strengths and weaknesses, and CRT theorists recognize that

the framework is not a panacea for all that ails children of color in U.S. schools and will be subject to various critiques. However, these critiques should not allow for a much needed examination of race and racism in education to not occur. More importantly, future research concerned with CRT can directly address these critiques conceptually and empirically, which will only strengthen the paradigm as it continues to emerge in educational research.

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND ITS CHALLENGE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

This article began using Derek Bell's parable of the Space Traders who essentially challenged the U.S. to contemplate the value of African Americans. In many ways, the plight of African American males in Pre-K through post-secondary education may ask educational scholars how much we value young Black males in this society; if they are valued, how can so many of them encounter such unsettling experiences in schools? How can their pleas for help go seemingly unheard? Where is the plethora of research and funding opportunities to identify meaningful interventions for this group?

The CRT challenge in education should be centered on several fronts that may provide interventions for the state of affairs of African American males. CRT has played an important role in legal decisions. Crenshaw et al. (1995) contend that one of the common interests of critical race theory in the legal arena is not to "merely understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it" (pp. xiii). Critical race theorists in education must be willing to adopt a similar stance; a stance that is centered not only on ideology, but on reliable research, useful strategies, and effective interventions that will improve the day-to-day realities, educational prospects, and life chances of African American males and other disenfranchised student groups.

As previously mentioned, CRT can be applied in key aspects of the schooling experience of African American males in tangible ways. Ladson-Billings (2004) argues that there are several areas of education that are amenable to a CRT analysis, namely curriculum, instruction, and assessment. She contends that a close examination of each of these areas suggests that students from racially diverse backgrounds experience significantly different accounts of what is taught, how it is taught, and the ways schools evaluate what students know. Traditional curriculum that does not reflect the experiences, histories, and issues that are germane to African American males, could be reevaluated for the relevance that they have to various student populations. A multitude of scholars have made



the call for curriculum revisions that are multicultural (Banks, 1997; Gay, 1994), critical multicultural (McLaren, 1994), and anti-racist (Brandt, 1986). Similar claims can be made for revising instructional approaches. The intricacies of human variation as manifested by culture tell us that students vary widely in their modes of communication, cognitive development, modes of expression, motivation, and world views, each of which influences learning (Rogoff, 1990), and as a result teacher pedagogy should be reflexive and culturally responsive to these differences.

So where else can CRT position itself in the field of education? How does it challenge the status quo regarding racial justice in ways similar to the legal field? Where are the racial tensions in education that allow CRT to be utilized? Two areas that would be ideal for a critical race examination of African American males would be standardized testing and school discipline. In the most recent era of educational accountability where “No Child Left Behind” has become the law of the land, the implementation of standards-based learning and high stakes testing has become the vehicle used to sort and stratify students in the name of school reform. Ladson-Billings (2004) states that “from a CRT perspective, current assessment schemes continue to instantiate inequity and validate the privilege of those who have access to cultural capital” (p.60).

A perusal of the national data shows that an increasing number of states have adopted high stakes testing for their students, with a growing number of them using these tests to determine important decisions such as grade promotion, retention, and graduation. Conversely, recent research has found that sole reliance on high stakes testing as a graduation or promotion requirement may increase inequities and drop-out rates among students by both race and gender, with African American males being the student group most likely to drop out because of high school exit exams (Dee & Jacob, 2006). Some accounts assert that tests by themselves do not improve student achievement (Brennan, Kim, Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 2001). Thus, an area of increasing concern is that there seems to be a high correlation among test performance, socioeconomic background, and the race of students. It is no accident that student performance on high stakes tests is frequently tied to students’ socioeconomic background and the level of teachers’ experience and overall school quality. Given the fact that students of color and from low-income backgrounds are more likely to come from poorly funded schools, and have under qualified and inexperienced teachers, one can only question the wisdom of evaluating students on similar measure as students who come from schools with more resources and more qualified teachers. Consequently the poorer students perform on standardized tests that serve as gatekeepers to grade promotion and retention, the

more likely they are to drop out—a reality that has increasingly affected African American males. More troubling is the reinforcement of racist and classist normative beliefs that students who do perform poorly on such tests are therefore less capable, less intelligent, and inherently less prepared to do well in school and society. The test scores are viewed as reliable “evidence” to make such claims about particular populations. CRT must contribute to other works that help to uncover the ways that race, class, gender, and overall structural inequities play a significant role in the student performance

The second area where CRT may bring attention to issues affecting African American males is in the area of school discipline. The “zero tolerance” policy that was designed in the mid-to-late 1990s to curb school violence seems to have clear racial overtones in terms of who is most affected. According to the 2000 Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) report, African American students are 2.6 times more likely than White students to be suspended from school. The OCR data also reveals that African American males are more likely to be expelled from schools than any other racial or ethnic group. The U.S. Department of Education reported that in the year 2000, African American students accounted for 34% of all out-of-school suspensions, and 30% of all expulsions, with the overwhelming majority of these students being male, a disproportionate percentage for a group of students who make up 7% of the total student population.

The growing rates of suspensions and expulsions in the name of “zero-tolerance” may give administrators the appeal of get-tough and no-nonsense policies, however, the fallout seems to be that students’ academic prospects suffer when they are suspended or expelled. Research shows that students who have been suspended or expelled are increasingly likely to drop out of school, and subsequently more likely to become juvenile delinquents. Skiba and Noam (2001) looked at zero-tolerance in thirty-seven states using data from 2000 to assess its relationship to achievement, behavior and youth incarceration. They found that schools with high out-of-school suspension rates had lower achievement in eighth grade math, writing, and reading. Moreover, the data revealed that states with higher rates of school suspensions were more likely to have higher incarceration rates from their students. Most troubling was that Skiba and Noam (2001) found that in almost every state African American males had higher suspension, expulsion, and incarceration rates than the general population by far.

The confluence of persistent low achievement and soaring suspension and expulsion rates of African American males may suggest an emerging “school-to-prison” pipeline that is becoming a mainstay in many schools

across the country (Skiba, et.al, 2003). Critical race theorists can interrogate the criminalization of many young Black males in schools today, and ask “How and why has zero-tolerance policies had a disproportionate and more punitive affect on young Black males than any other student group?” This is particularly disturbing when the zero-tolerance policy was largely in response to the spate of random school shootings that were occurring in the mid-to-late 1990s, none of which, coincidentally, included African American males as the perpetrators. How can policies be evaluated to assess their fairness, and be reconstituted to insure that particular groups are not disproportionately punished? Methodologically, CRT-based research can not only examine the racial disparities in testing and school discipline, but this research can also provide qualitative studies that allow students to talk about the ramifications that policies and practices have on their perceptions of school and how they believe their lives are influenced by them.

I began this article using Derek Bell’s parable of the Space Traders, and posed the question, what would happen if young Black males were no longer in our existence — how would the educational research community react? Or perhaps, the more poignant question that R&B legend Marvin Gaye poses, “Who really cares?” I maintain that the educational research community must engage in serious soul searching about the work that we do, and the utility that it possesses in the lives of every day citizens. Not only must we ask of what relevance does our work have to the larger society, another question we should ponder is, does our work in any way contribute to the transformation of disenfranchised populations? Some would argue that it is not our purpose to save the world, but that it is our task to responsibly and reliably investigate various phenomena in education, identify meaningful interventions, and contribute to new knowledge about how education works. Nonetheless, I would maintain that we have an obligation to do more than merely talk about, or theorize, the real challenges that scores of young people courageously live through every day in our society. Our challenge must be to listen to the stories, experiences, challenges, setbacks, successes, and triumphs of those on the margins.

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