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# Black Males And The Literacy Gap: How Can Professional Development Help Support Literacy Development Of Elementary Black Males In A Western Suburban School District?

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BLACK MALES AND THE LITERACY GAP: HOW CAN PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT HELP SUPPORT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF ELEMENTARY  
BLACK MALES IN A WESTERN SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT?

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Hamline University

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To my wife, who has supported me throughout this process and never let me give up on myself or my dreams. Thank you to my father for raising me and teaching me how to survive in America and being there for me in the darkest times. Mom, you worked hard everyday to ensure I had all my essential needs and taught me that education would take me to new worlds in life. Many men in my family worked hard and survived eras of discrimination and segregation so that I could be where I am today. Thank you to Hamline University for the support in my program and giving me an opportunity to better myself for the good of the world. To my fellow Black males in America, believe these three things: we are intelligent, creative, and can achieve anything we put our minds to.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The historical experiences of Blacks are unlike those of any other ethnic group in this country. No other group was denied their basic human, social, and economic rights for over 300 years (King, 1997). Many slave states passed anti-slavery laws that included those against literacy that would foster an institutional identity perspective. It was not an unusual situation for any slave to seek literacy and freedom (Ciardiello, 2004; Hyde, 2008; Young, 2012). Tatum (2012) says the reasons that Black males sought to be literate during the 19th century education movement of the North was to improve their social and economic status; strive for racial uplift; advance the economic, social, and political aims of the community; tear down the walls of discrimination; and advance human liberty. One of the most actively discussed and at times debated issues since the late 1980s has been the declining, social, economic, and educational status of Black males in our society (Garibaldi, 1992).

#### **My Personal Journey**

Growing up as a kid in the 1990s residing in south suburban Chicago, my mother and father would always tell me how literacy would take me to worlds unknown. They too understood the pressures of being Black in America as both of them grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. History speaks to this time in



our American history when many individuals fought and sacrificed their lives for freedom. My parents' message was rooted in the importance of being educated and how it would help me be able to contribute in society, as well as to achieve many of my dreams. The path to becoming a teacher was not always easy for me, but with guidance from teachers, parents, and family members I was able to defy the odds and become a contributing member of society. I am thankful to be in the position as a teacher as I look to inspire the next generation of young Black males who roam the halls in our academic institutions. Teachers played a huge role in my educational experience and I owe it to my students to deliver them the same message that I was given.

I remember being an energetic, intelligent young boy who was reading chapter books in the first grade, whizzing through words and numbers faster than my classmates. I found ways to entertain myself in the classroom most likely due to the fact that much of the curriculum that was taught had no relevance to my life. Many days I remember being put out of the classroom by teachers, suspended from school, spending much time in the principal's office, which resulted in missing valuable classroom time. I was already labeled as a "behavior issue" by many in my elementary school building due to my energy and so-called aggressiveness, which led me to think at times that I was a problem. In the book, *The Souls of Black Folks*, by W.E.B. Dubois (Howard, 2013; Dubois, 1903) he poses a question in his chapter "Of Our Spiritual Strivings". Dubois asks, "How does it feel to be a problem?" This question was within the context of how Blacks who were striving for social, economic, and political inclusion at the turn of the 20th century. That

question speaks to how Black males may feel at the turn of the 21st century. That is how I felt when I was in school and at times I still wonder if this is how society still views me.

Teaching at a school in a first ring, western suburban district of Minneapolis, I tend to see a mix of suburban and urban Black males disengaged and disconnected from the realms of school culture. I often think of what can I do for myself in the classroom or to help other educators see that we must pay attention to these intelligent boys and all that they have to offer. When I see these young men, not wanting to read, refusing to read, it hits me to the heart. I know that these young scholars have all the ability to be successful in school, because when I look at them, I see myself.

I seek many opportunities to improve my craft and attend professional developments that will enhance my students' learning experience . Many professional developments offered in this west suburban school district focus on the achievement gap amongst Black and White students, but at times I want to dive a bit deeper and look specifically at the literacy gap amongst Black and White males. Where is the conversation pertaining to Black males that we speak about that are at times disengaged during our literacy blocks? These experiences have led me to the following guiding question for this project: How can professional development help support literacy development of Black males in a western suburban school district?

### **Literacy Gap**

In the fall of 2018, I remember sitting in a grade level data meeting with Title 1 teachers, special education teachers, and other classroom teachers and we began to look

at spreadsheets of data. Using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test data and Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) data, a picture in my mind began to form as we sorted through the findings. I thought to myself, does this data present a picture about Black males and their educational experience? Is there a literacy gap for these young men in this district? What does the gap look like nationally?

The MCA tests are state tests in reading, mathematics, and science that are used to meet federal and state legislative requirements. The test is given every year to measure student performance relative to Minnesota Academic Standards based on what students should know and be able to do. Taking a look at data from this western suburban school district of Minneapolis, there is evidence of a literacy gap according to this state administered test. According to data from the Minnesota Report Card (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018) in 2018, grades third through sixth presented a gap in reading on MCA test scores. In looking at proficiency for Black males in third grade, it says that 37.7% were proficient on the test in comparison to 72.4% for White males. In fourth grade, it was 23.5% for Black males and 68.4% for White males. Black males in fifth grade in the district were 50.9% proficient in comparison to 78.9% for White males. In 6th grade, Black males were 35.2% proficient on the MCAs and White males were 86.6% proficient. In all grades tested, Black males in this district are at 36.0% proficiency on the MCAs which is more than the state average for Black males which is 29.4% according to data from 2018.

### **Impact of the Black Male Literacy Gap**

Literacy development is of key importance to children's overall academic success (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010; Pressley, 2002). Reading and writing skills play a prominent role in separating children who will have academic success and those who will not. Early difficulties in literacy also negatively affect children's future success; place them at risk for problems in reading and writing; and are correlated with low performance in other academic domains, placement in special education services, social deviance, school dropout, and a number of other academic and social problems.

Wald and Losen (as cited in Rashid, 2009) have written about the "school to prison pipeline", the relationship between what happens to Black males in school and their placement in the nation's penitentiaries. Young Black men continue to drop out in huge numbers, and ultimately into federal and state prisons. Mass incarceration is a part of the American welfare state policy that affects educational attainment and individual mobility. Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu (as cited in Haddix, 2009), spawned a national debate over his claim that there is a genocide - the deliberate and systematic destruction - of the Black male. Solving the problems of Black males may eliminate the problems of future Black men.

### **Value of Professional Development**

Teachers, politicians, parents, school districts, and school boards should be looking at this data and questioning how can we narrow this gap? What can we do to prepare teachers to have the tools necessary to ensure that specific groups of students are

not being left behind? We want all our students to be successful in school so that they can be contributing members of society.

Many of my colleagues have questions as to how to decrease the gap for Black males and often wonder of ways to engage them in literacy. Using data, looking at best practices, and having courageous conversations could inform many teachers on effective ways to engage them in their literacy blocks. Understanding the importance of literacy for these vibrant scholars could help teachers be more aware of their teaching practices when engaging them. If teachers want to help prevent the school to prison pipeline that exists, then consistent and authentic professional development could be a step in the right direction. One way in which I want to make a difference is by investigating how professional development could help support literacy development of Black males in a suburban school district? The creation of this project could provide a spark to future professional development opportunities for teachers in suburban, urban, and rural districts that serve them in the state of Minnesota.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, there was a brief historical reference to what Blacks and specifically Black males have gone through in order to become literate. My journey as a adolescence to becoming a teacher was filled with many of the same obstacles that many Black males are faced with today. The literacy gap between Black males and White males in this western suburban school district based on MCA data for grades three through six is evident. The lack of literacy for some of these young men could result in incarceration,

better noted as the school to prison pipeline. Professional development opportunities could be a spark in allowing teachers to dive deeper into this literacy gap. Chapter Two presents the literature that is being used within this project to support professional development opportunities. In Chapter Three, the description of the project, theories and rationale will be explained in detail. Chapter Four will be the concluding chapter, focusing on a reflection of the project.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of my project is to provide professional development opportunities around the topic of Black males and the literacy gap so that the education community can help combat the school to prison pipeline. My guiding question is: How can professional development help support literacy development of Black males in a western suburban school district? This literature review will look into the different aspects of the Black male literacy gap. Early literacy gaps begin for some Black males entering kindergarten and at times those gaps continue to extend to further grades. The school to prison pipeline is connected to the literacy gap, where some Black males aren't having success in school and is leading to incarceration in later years of their lives. Teachers should have an understanding of effective classroom practices that can engage elementary Black males in their literacy blocks. Understanding how they think and their learning styles could potentially decrease the literacy gap and ultimately keep many from being apart of the school to prison pipeline that exist. Adult learning theories will be visited to understand how adults learn so that professional development is more meaningful in helping equip educators with the mindsets needed to engage Black males in the classroom.

## **Literacy Gap**

Howard, Anderson, and Noguera (2013) say that Black males continue to be a focus of conversation as they continue to be one of the more academically challenged and marginalized groups of students in our American schools. In national data from 2008, 47% of Black males graduated within four years from U.S high schools compared with 78% for White males (Howard, 2013; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). NAEP reading scores for Black male fourth graders are the lowest of any of the tested subgroups (Lee, Grigg & Donahue, 2007; Rashid, 2009). There is an undeniable achievement gap separating Black males and their peers (Garibaldi, 1992; Morrell, 2006; Wood & Jocius, 2013)

Tatum (as cited in Wood and Jocius, 2013) states that the problem of how to increase literacy achievement of Blacks is embedded in social, cultural, and economic and historical dynamics. Our academic institutions often fail to consider the whole child, which alienates young Black boys and leads them to falling through the cracks of our school systems.

For young Black males a major indicator of early literacy skills is their reading scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress (Rashid et al.,2009). The literacy level of young Black males has become a critical indicator of their futures.



### **Early Gaps**

There is evidence early elementary literacy levels predict high school literacy (Rashid, 2009 & Werner, 1972). These brilliant little minds typically enter the preschool at age three very curious and often reflect the psychomotor precocity that has been well-documented in infants of color. According to Boykin (as cited in Rashid, 2009) they emerge six years later and head into fourth grade with the lowest reading levels; lowest expectations from teachers; and the highest suspension, expulsion, and special education referral rates of any group of children in the United States. Haddix (2009) says statistical and policy reports that place Black males and low academic performance often times could lead to failure when we don't challenge why this prevalent discussions exists in the first place.

### **School Discipline**

A racial/cultural factor that contributes to reading underachievement in Black males concerns school disciplinary policies (Mendez & Hoff, 2003; Husband, 2012). Black males are suspended at disproportionate rates in most schools. This time spent out of school has a direct effect on academic achievement in general and reading achievement in particular. An analysis of four years of archived reading achievement and disciplinary data found that Black boys who were suspended from school had lower levels of reading achievement than other students. The study also implies that when removed from class or school on a consistent basis as a disciplinary measure they may not acquire the foundational reading skills necessary to become proficient readers

(Husband, 2012). Official policies such as zero-tolerance discipline and unofficial policies such as overrepresentation of students of color in special education affect the quality and quantity of education students receive, which affects students' academic achievement and opportunities (Winn, Behizadeh, Duncan, Fine, & Gadsden, 2011).

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

Civil rights are composed of skills and actions necessary for political and civil involvement. Voting and protesting are commonly viewed as civil rights, but reading and writing are also activities crucial for civic involvement, specifically the ability to read and write critically (Winn et al., 2011). Because of the destructive consequences of denying both basic and critical literacies to students (due to incarceration) literacy has become a new civil rights frontier.

The United States has seen a dramatic surge in imprisonments in the Black community. One in eight Black males ages 25-29 was behind bars in 2004. Given current trends, one Black male child out of three will go to prison or jail at some point in his lifetime (Mechoulan, 2011). The lack of early childhood education and the denial of a college-preparatory K-12 education promoting critical literacies have contributed to producing what has been referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (Winn et. al., 2011).

The preschool to prison pipeline runs from preschool settings through elementary and middle schools, into the high schools from which young Black men continue to drop out of school and ultimately into federal and state prisons (Rashid, 2009 & Comer, 2004). Our society is paying a high cost for the control, containment, and support of adults who,

if they had been helped in school, and in the home and community could have been productive, contributing citizens. The inability to function well in one generation very often leads to the same inability in subsequent generations. The next section will offer insight into ways that educators can engage Black males in the classroom.

### **Unique Strengths and Skills**

Black males strongly desire to achieve academically and need to be supported by a community of individuals from teachers, parents, and family. Studies show that intrinsic motivation leads to higher self-esteem, more self-worth, and a confidence that demonstrates their academic ability (Hale, 1982; Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; all as cited in Wright, 2009). They also possess skills that allow them to thrive among challenges they face. Many have developed and use coping strategies that buffer the challenges they experience in their communities and schools, and in larger societies . These strategies that are used involve verbal skills and social behavioral skills (Wright, 2009).

**Verbal skills.** Among these are rapping, joking, woffin' and playing the dozens. Joking represents an exertion of social control, language socialization, and verbal play (Wright, 2009). According to Dandy, Kunjufu, and Wright (as cited in Wright, 2009) those attributes show strength, pride, and independence to handle mean comments. Many have described the elements of joking such as fast delivery, sing song intonation, emphatic stress, and bonding. There has not been a lot of attention to how these expedite school success.

Rappin' is a style of talking in the which the speaker includes their personality to make an impression on the audience or peers (Wright et al., 2009). Woffin' is strong language that is pure boasting, or a way to brag; many from the outside looking in always take it for the real thing. Playin' the dozens, which could begin early as six is taken as a rite of manhood as well as a form of discourse. Smitherman (as cited in Wright, 2009) states that it begins with two opponents that battle verbally, making belittling remarks about one's family or any other subject matter. The basis for the game is call and response, which is judged by a group of individuals. Young Black men will need to withstand situations of distress, such as racism and discrimination and still maintain composure. Incidentally, some Black males survive in their peer groups because they use a variety of these characteristics which represent their expressive culture.

**Social: The cool pose.** Majors and Billson (as cited in Kirkland & Jackson, 2009) describe coolness as a strategy used by Black males to counter racism. Of all the injustices and systems of oppression that Black males have endured throughout our history, self identity is at times in question. The "cool pose" is an example of empowerment to the Black male. Looking at the psychological assessment of coolness, many have argued that the social numbing that being cool produces, explains, in part why some Black males struggle in school. Black male lives are compromised by the search for coolness as it corresponds with a set of negative behaviors that could potentially hurt their ability to succeed in school.

These unique skills and strengths that Black males possess can facilitate their success in schools when teachers recognize and understand them (Wright et al., 2009). These young boys possess an intellect and a wealth of knowledge that is not often transferred into the ways in which knowledge must be presented in the classroom (Wood & Jocius, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Milner proclaims (2007) Black males need to understand that their future situations can be better than their current. If a student knows nothing but mediocrity, it is going to be a difficult for that student to see anything different, thus this individual will strive for mediocrity. However, when students realize that they are struggling and not succeeding, but that it is quite possible to turn it around, they are more likely to work harder. Understanding Black boys and their unique strengths and skills can help educators in the classroom and their teaching styles. The next section will focus on specific classroom approaches when teaching Black males in the classroom.

### **Teaching Approaches**

#### **Critical Literacy**

Black males and their struggles in the classroom have been well documented (Wood & Jocius, 2013). Tatum argues (as cited in Wood & Jocius, 2013) that texts that are used to engage Black males are often absent from curriculum, teachers don't have strategies to increase engagement, and educators often find it hard to use texts that counter in-school and out-of-school issues. Theories of critical literacy encompass social, political, and historical contexts that allow students to consider the influence of

institutions on their everyday lives (Wood & Jocious, 2013; Rogers, 2002). It allows students to expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings. Critical literacy raises the expectations for achievement by challenging traditional forms of literacy instruction, encourages collaborative learning, and allows students to foster a sense of social justice (Wood & Jocious, 2013).

Critical literacy can create opportunities for students to recognize that the experiences outside of school are valued in the classroom. The use of critical literacy strategies can help teachers and students counter assumptions often made about Black males in the media and in traditional text. In addition, critical literacy can provide opportunities for teacher to use texts that connect with the happenings in the communities in which students live.

### **Hip Hop**

Keyes (as cited in Callahan & Grantham, 2010) says that emceeing/rapping (Hip-Hop) can be traced back to the Griot tradition in West Africa. Griot is a french term that refers to a male and female trained in the oral traditions. Through songs, poems, and stories, they memorize and recall their local history. Griots are known for their wit, musicianship, and ability to compose or freestyle on current events. Gifted Black males, in general, are attracted to Hip Hop because of the creativity, youthfulness, and sense of freedom associated with Hip Hop culture (Cooks, 2004; Callahan & Grantham, 2012; Jonson, 2006; Weinstein, 2006). Tatum and Morrell (as cited in Haddix, 2010) remind us of the importance of drawing on Black linguistic and rhetorical traditions (Haddix et al.,

2009), spoken word traditions (Haddix, 2010 & Fisher, 2007), and critical and Hip Hop literacies (Haddix et al., 2009) that are often positioned as different from traditional schooling.

Hip Hop is a form of social action and justice (Callahan & Grantham, 2012) Teachers can differentiate learning experiences for gifted males. Hip Hop began in part as a response to issues that have happened to Blacks in the past. A certain group of people (young, socioeconomically disadvantaged, Blacks and Latinos in S. Bronx) responded to social conditions in ways that lead to the creation of Hip Hop. Understanding the conditions that created Hip Hop is critical to understanding the gifted males who embrace it. A few recommendations for educators are to use Hip Hop as an interest for teaching. Using outlets such as slam poetry, music camps, open mikes, talent shows, activism are excellent for students to express themselves through Hip Hop art forms and traditions. Educators should push students to think about opportunities that allow them to create. Careers such as videographers, sound engineers, journalist, and web designers should be encouraged.

### **Active Instructional Strategies**

Black students benefit more often from instructional activities that are highly stimulating, active, and arousing than from lecture style and teacher centered activities (Husband, 2012). Webb-Johnson (as cited in Husband, 2012) points out that Black males in particular respond better in instructional environments that center on interaction, movement, and energy. Regrettably, many early childhood and elementary teachers

construct activities that don't take the learning styles of these young boys into consideration. These teaching and learning inconsistencies can be linked to disparities in achievement across content areas, particularly in reading (Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

### **Student-Centered Approaches**

Tatum (2012) states that student-centered approaches of learning have great potential to advance the literacy of Black males in the classroom. Internal and external factors help with developing resiliency. Internal factors include academic skills, a strong self concept, and community supports. External factors that could help promote resilience include a consistent caring adult, positive expectations, and opportunities for participation.

An essential piece to Black male success is care, which is true for all students, specifically students in urban classrooms (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1990; Noddings, 1992; Milner IV, 2007). Irvine (as cited in Milner IV, 2007) explained that teaching is about building and maintaining relationships. Teachers should want for their Black male students the same opportunities that they want for their own children.

Baldrige, Hill, and Davis (as cited in Howard, 2013) looked into the role of community based organizations and its framework in supporting Black males academically and personally. Their work is important because they shed light on how Black males view their schooling experience. Fashola (as cited in Howard, 2013) investigated the importance of afterschool programs. She found that effective programs



were specific in the group (s) that were targeted and provided ongoing professional development opportunities to staff and faculty working with Black males. Programs such as the Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers/Sisters, and the Coca-Cola VP offered support to supplement the academic shortcomings that may exist for Black males. These spaces have certain attributes that some schools may not have, such as fewer restrictions on hiring staff, which could make a more beneficial learning environment for Black males to learn. Along with classroom practices that can engage Black males, educators need to have a specific mindset when engaging these bright individuals. The section that follows this will tap into teacher mindsets needed when interacting with this specific group.

### **Teacher Mindsets**

Understanding self in teaching and learning is extremely important (Freire, 1998; Howard, 2001; Milner IV, 2007; Rios, 1996.) West (as cited in Milner IV, 2007) explained that it is difficult for a person to work for liberation for others until he or she is free. Thinking about self in relation to others means that teachers are thinking deeply about their own perspectives, privileges, beliefs, and life worlds comparison and contrast to their students and communities. Brown (as cited in Milner IV, 2007) concludes that teachers who make the most improvement in knowledge and understanding of racial and cultural diversity have explored their personal histories, value systems, developed an understanding of other cultures, and expanded their reference group to include others.

### **Respect for Black Males**

Black male students often hear negativity in regards to their lives and situations. We pay a huge price when we speak destruction into the lives of students. Black males often hear people talk in deficit terms, such as the media calling them at risk. They understand that they are not supposed to be successful (Milner IV, 2007). Haberman (as cited in Milner IV, 2007) suggested that language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. Our language shapes our perceptions, our understandings, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement.

Black males respect their teachers when their teachers respect them. Successful teachers of Black male students don't put them down; they value their perspectives and provide them space to have voice in the classroom (Milner IV, 2007). Empowering students to speak about their lives and teachers speaking about future opportunities and possibilities for the lives of their students is equally important.

Educators must change their negative thinking about Black males or we will find ourselves on this continued road of failure where Black males in schools are concerned (Milner IV, 2007). Rooted in minds of some teachers' are stereotypes and misconceptions about Black males that prevent teachers from providing the best learning opportunities. If teachers believe that Black males are destined for failure, the pedagogies will be saturated with low expectations. Deficit thinking and beliefs result in inaccurate, incorrect, and harmful perceptions of Black students .

Haddix (as cited in Husband, 2012) informs us that Black males and literacy emphasizes a “failure” perspective. Teachers at times think and discuss Black males’ literacy development as poor or struggling readers. Teachers are more likely to rely on lower-level texts and instructional strategies (drill and skill, worksheets) than high level texts and instructional strategies. This ultimately leads to a denial of rigorous learning opportunities that will lead to reading underachievement (Husband, 2012; Milner, 2010.)

Black males in urban classrooms is one of the most important research agendas in education. Black males can and do succeed across the world. The success that is achieved is not an exception. There are committed, confident, and competent teachers from various ethnic backgrounds who care about these students success (Milner IV, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

### **Caring for Black Males in the Classroom**

Teachers always speak of their care for students across school contexts. Caring for students is indeed essential, especially in urban classrooms (Milner IV, ,2007). Talking about care is one thing, but demonstrating that care is more important. Brown (as cited in Milner IV, 2007) conducted a study on 13 urban teachers that showed interest in students. Teachers demonstrated care by offering compliments on dress, allowing students to do make-up work and extra credit at the end of the term if students were at risk of failing, and attending after-school activities. Teachers should want for their Black male students the same kinds of opportunities and lifestyles that they aspire for their own biological children.

## **Adult Learning Theories**

The importance of learning how adults learn can help with the formation of effective professional development. According to Knowles (as cited in Zepeda, Oksana, & Bengtson, 2014) the theory of adult learning continues to develop. Adult learning theory incorporates action learning, experiential learning, and self directed and project based learning (Zepeda et al., 2014). To be effective, this learning should be constructed on ownership, appropriateness, structure, collaboration, internalization, reflection, and motivation (Zepeda et al., 2014). Illeris (as cited in Zepeda, 2014) says that adults best learn when they find subjects meaningful whether because it is something they want to learn or because it is something they feel it is important or necessary.

### **Humanist Theory**

From a learning theory perspective, humanism emphasizes that our thoughts are centered in our experiences, as well as the ability to become what we are capable of. This underlies much of the adult learning that stresses self-directedness of adults (Belanger, 2011; Merriam & Cafarella, 1999). Maslow (as cited in Belanger, 2011) proposed the theory of human motivation based on a hierarchy of needs, ranging from physical needs at the lowest level to self-esteem and self-actualisation at the highest. Learning is a process in which people look to fulfill their individual potential; learning is a form of self actualisation.

Belanger (2011) asserts that some key concepts from this theory is self-actualisation which is defined as the inner drive to activate one's capacity, become

free, mature, and enhance self. Learning experiences accumulate through lived situations integrated by individuals through reflective practice. Significant learning becomes significant and sustainable when the experience is relevant, progressive, and inner directive.

### **Transformative Learning**

In the early 1980s, Jack Mezirow introduced the concept of transformative change in the analysis of adult learning processes (Belanger, 2011). Transformative learning's intent is not only to obtain knowledge through experience, but also to retrieve, test, construct, and master new knowledge and fresh ways to perceive reality (Belanger, 2011; Mezirow, 1991).

Another critical dimension of this learning theory is the reflexive process of becoming independent from the context of learning and access high levels of liberation (Belanger, 2011; Mezirow, 2006.) Social and cultural restraints are sources of learning and could diminish one's beliefs, question one's frame of reference and destabilize one's mindsets. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences (Belanger, 2011; Mezirow, 2000). Belanger states (2011) that key concepts of transformative learning are emancipation: freedom from previous beliefs and interpretations that deviate from reality, scheme of reference and the lens through which one sees his or her reality, critical reflection of assumptions through which one revises usual ways of seeing oneself and one's relationship, habits of mind, and points of view.

### **Leading for Equity**

If leaders in education want to confront and reverse some of the racial inequities in schools and systems, they need to provide opportunities for staff to engage in meaningful discussions about questions that many would not consider speaking about (Ngonunou & Gutierrez, 2017). Topics such as race and its effects of student placement in courses, parental engagement, and discipline practices are important for this work in equity. These conversations must be ongoing and handled with great care.

Ngonunou and Gutierrez (2017) identify four key principles that are crucial for leaders to understand: professional learning about race and equity requires a systems-thinking approach; professional learning about race and equity requires some willingness to experience discomfort; professional learning about race and equity requires people to tell their stories; and professional learning about race and equity rarely leads to closure. The work of promoting racial equity in K-12 education is a non-negotiable. Our children, especially those who are the most vulnerable, need educators to push themselves to ensure policies and practices are just.

### **Summary**

Overall, Black males have all the tools essential to be successful in our academic institutions. These young scholars are resilient and possess skills that allow them to think critically in a literacy environment. The literacy gap that our Black males continue to be faced with is one that is deeply rooted in our system of education. The school to prison pipeline is realistic for some Black males who oftentimes aren't getting what is needed in

our American education system. There are many factors that play into this lack of literacy for these young men, both being internal and external. Educators play a vital role in reversing this process that has occurred over time.

When looking at the guiding question of this project, How can professional development help support literacy development of elementary black males in a western suburban school district?, ongoing and strategic professional development is required to ensure school leaders have true and honest understandings of the work that is needed to be done to put Black males on the same playing field as the rest of their peers. Adult learning processes such as the humanist theory, experiential learning theory, and the transformative learning theory are important as these different approaches should be taken into consideration when looking to plan engaging professional development opportunities for educators. Mindsets for both the educator and the learner must change if this literacy gap is to decrease.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss some of the methods used to create professional development sessions for my project. The research from the literature review will be critical in the creation of professional development opportunities for educators in a western suburban school district. Equity is important work in the field of education as a literacy gap is evident for our Black males. The project is intended for educators in a pre-kindergarten through sixth grade setting to provide an opportunity for growth, conversation, and reflection surrounding the topic of Black males and the literacy gap.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

The research question that has been deeply investigated is How can professional development help support literacy development of elementary Black males in a western suburban school district? Giving educators the space to dive deeper into this issue could provide many opportunities for productive conversations. These professional development opportunities for educators in a pre-kindergarten through sixth grade building could be a step into future conversations surrounding Black males and the literacy gap. This chapter will dive into the learning theories that helped with the creation of the project, the rationale for choosing the project, a description of the setting, and a brief introduction into Chapter Four.

#### **Frameworks for the Project**

Educators' professional development is a type of adult learning that occurs on site or during professional learning initiatives, seminars, or trainings (Zepeda, Parlyo, & Bengston, 2014). Fogarty and Pete (as cited in Zepeda et al., 2014) suggested five qualities of rigorous professional development. Training must be sustained as it is implemented over time. It should be job-embedded, where it takes place and continues at the work site. It is interactive and involves engagement of participants. The training



should also involve a community of learners and be multiformed (web-based, online, text, face to face).

Learning experiences are significant when it has meaning for the individual, when that individual can relate the event to their personal needs (Belanger, 2011). It is important that the individual can see that they are getting something out of it. Merriam and Caffarella (as cited in Belanger, 2011) proposed that adult learning theory stresses the self-directedness of adults and the value of experience in the learning process.

Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change (Belanger, 2011; Mezirow, 2003) Key concepts of this theory are social change, scheme of reference, critical reflection, and emancipation (Belanger, 2011). Mezirow (as cited in Belanger, 2011) suggest that the issue is not to only get new learnings, but to develop new lenses in how we look at reality and existing knowledge.

### **Equity Training**

At times there is a tendency for educators to look at equity focused instructional learning as a box on their to do-list to check off. It is treated as a complex robust challenge that requires new learning and more time for solutions (Heifetz, 1994; Ngounou & Gutierrez, 2017). Ngounou and Gutierrez (2017) assert that if education leaders want to confront and undo severe racial inequities in schools and systems, creative opportunities for teachers and staff to engage in beneficial discussions are very important.

When equity training takes place across multiple levels of the system, involving a range of individuals from teachers and administrators to central office staff, parents, students, and community leaders, powerful changes can happen (Ngounou & Gutierrez, 2017). Singleton (as cited in Hirsch, 2005) believes that districts and schools need to engage into what he calls “courageous conversations”. These conversations are essential for addressing the difficult challenges that educators face in closing the achievement gap. Also, these conversations help educators become more passionate learners and are more productive in their work.

### **Making Meaning**

The Making Meaning reading program was developed out of the Center for Collaborative Classrooms. It is the first program to combine research-based best practices in reading comprehension with support for fostering students’ growth as caring, collaborative, and principled people (Making Meaning, 2019). It is focused on academic and social/ethical learning. Children learn and grow best in environments where their basic psychological needs are met.

The professional development uses strategies from the curriculum Making Meaning. Here are some of the comprehension strategies that are used in Making Meaning and the project; using schema/making connections, visualizing, wondering/questioning, using text features, making inferences, determining important ideas, and summarizing. Conversation is an integral part of Making Meaning as students need to understand how to communicate, develop empathy, and work together. There are

many opportunities in the project that involve those key components. Participants will be asked to talk in partners and in groups throughout the experience.

### **Setting and Audience**

The professional development takes place in a western suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The school district serves a kindergarten through 12th grade population serving about 6,820 students, where 46 different language groups are represented. The student demographics are as follows: 41.0% White, 25.4% Black or African American, 18.2% Hispanic or Latino, 8.1% Asian, 6.5% two or more races, .5% American Indian or Alaska Native, and .2% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Enrollment by Special Population demographics are: 16.9% English Learner , 16.7% Special Education, 50.6% Free/Reduced Priced Lunch , and 1.4% homeless (Minnesota Department of Education).

The target school where the professional development takes place serves pre-kindergarten through sixth grade students. The student demographics of the building are as follows: 8.8% Latino, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 14.0% Asian, 20.7% Black or African American, 45.0% White, and 11.2% identify as two or more races. Looking at enrollment by other criteria; 12.3% of the student population are English Language Learners, 11.4% receive Special Education services, and 45.0% are on Free or Reduced Lunch. The data for the demographics of licensed staff is: 94.23% White, 3.85% Black, and 1.92% Asian. All other groups reported no data for this statistic (Minnesota Department of Education).

The target school is also recognized as a STEM school. STEM concepts and skills are implemented at every level to help foster 21st century learning skills. The district is a leader in using digital content. These tools are essential in student learning, curriculum development, and as well in teacher training. The target school is Title 1 funded in which all services and programs are supplemental to classrooms. The program targets students in grades kindergarten to sixth grade. Parental involvement is also a part of the Title 1 plan so that parents can be actively involved in this process.

### **Rationale**

Black males are intelligent, resilient, and have tons to offer to the world. As I witness many young men falter due to the lack of literacy, I often wonder, “What can I do to help combat this phenomenon?” The literacy gap described in Chapter Two has existed for quite sometime and in order for things to change, teachers, parents, policy makers, administrators, and the community must collaborate to come up with solutions. We must also look at our practices and ensure that they align with the students whom we teach.

Professional development is important for educators as they look to self reflect and also learn new and innovative approaches to teaching their students. The project consists of professional development that involves four one-hour sessions where educators in pre K-6th grade, specialists, and SPED staff will engage in courageous conversations about the path of the Black male in education. This topic often brings many emotions and misconceptions and educators need the space to be able to talk about solutions for our students. Having a deeper understanding into the mindset of the Black

male is highly important and the information available should be of use to educators. Each session dives into a different topic but provides meaningful opportunities for reflection. The professional development session titles are titled: The Black Male Literacy Gap, Engaging Black Male Learners in Literacy, Making Meaning Using Culturally Relevant Teaching, and Self-Reflection.

The first session is to explain what the literacy gap is, analyze data, and give educators a snapshot of what is happening with Black males. The second session is geared to provide strategies in the classroom when teaching these young men. In the third session, educators will be given the opportunity to use their current curriculum and change or add on to lessons with strategies tailored for Black male learners. The last session involves self-reflection, which will allow teachers to think critically about their beliefs and practices.

### **Summary**

Professional development and equity work should go hand in hand when looking to engage Black males and ultimately close the achievement gap that exists. Although the topic can be stressful and emotional, understanding oneself as an educator and the perspective of others is critical in the process. Having courageous conversations allow for powerful dialogue which could lead to solutions. This project will ultimately help Black males in their school experience and not only growth of the student, but growth of the educators who will spend much of their time teaching these young souls.

In this chapter, adult learning theories were visited to understand the mindset of adults as well as practices for leading in equity-based professional development, the project rationale and its importance to the educational landscape were given, and the setting of the project was described. The concluding chapter of this project will offer an opportunity to be reflective of the the research and project process as well as looking into how this benefits the profession of education.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REFLECTION / CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

I got into the profession of education with the intentions of giving back to the world by empowering young people to achieve their hopes and dreams. A mentor of mine once told me that in this profession, you need to make sure that you keep ‘the main thing, the main thing’ and that is controlling what I can inside of my classroom. My mentor would often use phrases as, “Ignore the politics”, “You can’t save every student”, “Don’t ruffle any feathers”. These themes were constant in that initial conversation of me getting my teaching license. Although I agree with many things that he spoke to, watching young Black males in education and society continuously falling through the cracks has led me to frustration and a misunderstanding of this phenomenon where Black males are still falling behind their White male counterparts in literacy and life. The time is now for me to take action in a way that could have some impact to the profession.

In this chapter, I will talk about my experiences as a researcher, writer and learner. The literature will briefly be revisited to look at some sources that were key to my work. Thinking about all the implications and limitations within this project is an important part of the reflection process. This project could lead to future projects and professional developments that address the literacy gap amongst Black males and White males. Last, I

want to continue investigating and researching ways to challenge the status quo and help stop this gap that has our Black males continuously lagging behind in our schools.

### **Research Experience**

I have an approach to learning that is unique as I want to know it all. There is something that fuels me about acquiring new knowledge and understanding our world. I began this journey of deep learning when I decided to come back to school and attend Hamline. I knew that this opportunity would possibly put me in the position to be able to use my platform as an educator, to dig deeper into research, for the goal of elevating my voice to make change.

With every bit of research that was found, I felt angered, empowered, and saddened that in the year 2019, there is still a disconnect of Black males, schools, and society. This topic is heavily researched and many of the authors of the work are in tune with one another as many common names continuously popped up in others work. I could feel myself getting connected to names, common themes, and the same energy of wanting to enlighten educators on ways to decrease the Black male literacy gap. Much of the research that I read proved that a lot of my gut feelings were correct about the literacy gap that existed for Black males, but looking at historical and internal factors that affect Black males proved to be even more surprising. Overall, this experience has left me hungry for more and I intend on continuing this journey so that possibly someone could read my work and be inspired to make change.



### **Revisit of the Literature**

The literature involved came from many insightful individuals who have made great contributions in helping those in education figure out solutions to combat the literacy gap for Black males in our public schools. Literature that stands out to me comes from Mechoulam, Petit, and Western who say that one in eight Black males ages 25-29 was behind bars in 2004. Given current trends, one Black male child out of three will go to prison or jail at some point in his lifetime (Mechoulam, 2011; Petit, & Western, 2004). Learning about Black male masculinity and the role it plays in how Black males interact with the world and themselves was also eye-opening for me. Tatum and Wright say that Black masculinity is racialized and viewed as oppositional to the culture of school (Tatum, 2005; Wright, 2009). I looked back on my childhood in the 1990s and how I dressed, spoke, and behaved, and how the perceptions of the outside world played a factor in my school experience. The same thing that I went through, I see repeating itself with Black males in 2019. These young scholars are still continuously misunderstood by many in our society, ignoring the unique gifts and talents that we as Black males bring. The literature review gave me an in depth analysis into the Black male literacy gap, but also will inspire me to dig deeper in the future.

**Limitations**

These professional development opportunities are geared to give teachers data and strategies to help decrease the literacy gap in the target school. Although teachers could be knowledgeable of this phenomenon, one can't assume that they will be willing to consume this information or it could be a repeat of information that they already know, which could lead to less engagement in the sessions that were picked. Maybe teachers want more strategies? Could they need more research and data? One on one interviews with teachers could have offered more of a look into their mindsets and what they really need information on.

The data provided from the Minnesota Department of Education drills down, but in the report, numbers for Black males in 2016 are considered "count too small to report". This could lead to confusion or maybe conversations on why that is and how it affects the overall data report. This data could be not of much use to the building because of the numbers from 2016 being small.

The time frame for the sessions are four two-hour sessions given in consecutive order. The battle of this being too long is in question. The topics could potentially bring a lot of emotion due to the depth of the topic, so people may need more time to speak or they possibly will not be inspired to speak at all.

## **Implications**

These important conversations about the literacy gap of Blacks and Whites is nothing new in our current state of education. The creation of these professional developments is a step to get the ball rolling and help give educators what they need. This work is important work and all hands need to be on deck. Policy makers and school leaders who are making these decisions should have this important issue in education as number one the list. Our society is paying a price for not changing systems to ensure that all students are getting what is needed.

The words of “just another thing” when it comes to school initiatives should not be common talk amongst teachers when equity professional development comes around. This needs to be ongoing to signal that this is highly important and we will not stop until goals are achieved. When professional development comes around once or twice a year and then stops, nobody is fueled to continue the work, and results remain the same. People are making impacts in certain capacities, but collectively is it on the minds of everyone involved? Are those who hold the keys to keeping our systems intact prioritizing “Black males and the literacy gap” when looking to fund new initiatives? Teachers need strategies, training, and opportunities for conversations and it needs to be continuous.

## **Future Projects**

This project was just the beginning of my quest to seek more knowledge and spark change in education. I speak to ongoing professional development, this could be

something that I could do for districts and educators who are seeking to understand more about Black males and how to engage them in school and literacy. I've coached boys basketball for numerous years and understand the importance of being a role model and mentor. Starting a program that is geared towards the literacy development and social development of Black males is needed in areas where I reside.

Another project that is always on my mind is writing about my experiences as a Black male growing up in urban and suburban areas in the Midwest. My life has a story that many young Black males could relate to and could ultimately change someone's life or give them hope to continue to seek literacy as a component for literacy liberation.

### **Conclusion**

This project is a step in helping solve a problem that has existed for over 200 years. Teachers play a vital role in the success of students and they should be equipped with tools necessary to serve all students. The achievement gap amongst Black males and White males is a problem that is keeping our society from reaching its full potential. If I can contribute to decreasing the achievement gap of Black males in our society, I will continue to use my platform to help do so.

My grandfather fought for the Black community in Gary, Indiana in the 1970s and the 1980s. My great grandfather didn't have a high school education in the 1930s, but taught himself to read the Bible and worked in the harshest conditions without complaining, which has contributed to my success today. This project was developed to spark courageous conversations and to come up with solutions to this ongoing issue of a

Black male literacy gap that is affecting a western suburban school district and school districts across America who serve these vibrant, intelligent, creative, but often misunderstood individuals.

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