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# Does Leadership & Academic Coaching Paired With Small Peer Group Interaction Improve Black Male Student Academic Engagement, Self-Efficacy And Self-Esteem?

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DOES LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC COACHING PAIRED WITH SMALL PEER  
GROUP INTERACTION IMPROVE BLACK MALE STUDENT ACADEMIC  
ENGAGEMENT, SELF-EFFICACY AND SELF ESTEEM?

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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To my friends and family for encouraging and helping me through this process. Thank you to my Capstone Content Expert. Your guidance and support made it possible for me to finish this paper. Special thanks to my research participants who also helped to make this Capstone possible.

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.  
Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education”.  
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Most of society likes to think schools are places of fairness and equality. The statistics say there is an epidemic among young Black boys in this nation. According to Lynch (2015), this crisis begins at home, stretches to their educational experiences and leads straight to a cycle of incarceration. In American prison systems, black citizens are incarcerated at six times the rates of white citizens (Lynch, 2015). There are four troubling truths about Black boys and the United States educational system: unfortunately, they are more likely to be placed in special education, more likely to attend schools without the adequate resources, more likely to not be reading at an adequate level, and more likely to receive harsher punishments than any other demographic (Lynch, 2015). One potential way of decreasing the rates of incarceration could come from an improvement of educational outcomes and experiences for Black boys in the educational system. In my experiences, there is a direct correlation between dropout rates and crime rates. If educators will simply take a highly organized approach to keeping kids in school, it will make a difference in the crime statistics of the future (Lynch, 2015). This leads to my guiding question: *Does leadership and academic coaching paired with small peer group interaction improve Black male student academic engagement, self efficacy and self-esteem?*

## **What is Leadership and Academic Coaching?**

I took a class through my school district titled, “*Be Your Dream: Leadership and Academic Coaching Skills for Educators.*” This class is an experiential training that equips and empowers educators to bring out the best in others. In this class, we learned coaching skills and conversations based on the International Coach Federations’ Core Coaching Competencies evidence based practices. We also used the UP (Uncover & Process) Coaching Framework with students, colleagues or families to increase academic achievement, ensure equity and honor student/family/teacher voice. This is a highly flexible approach that gives us educators a framework and language for integrating coaching skills and structured coaching conversations into our professional practice. This can be used in everyday interactions, with Response To Intervention (RTI) and also with classroom management.

## **Coaching Goals-Course Overview**

The goal of the course, “*Be Your Dream: Leadership and Academic Coaching Skills for Educators*” is a practical training which teaches coaching skills and how to implement those skills into everyday and professional practice. The goal of the coaching sessions is to increase academic achievement, student engagement as well as self-efficacy. There were many topics addressed in class including: setting I-SMART (Specific, Measurable, Actionable & Accountable, Realistic and timely) Goals, identifying core values and strengths, building relational trusts with students and parents and how to use powerful questions as a strategy to get students moving towards their goals. During the course, we practiced coaching with our classmates and were able to get immediate feedback from the instructor as well as our classmates in order to better hone

our skills. When I can identify a student's core values during a coaching session, it allows for deeper conversation and questioning, which in turn makes the coaching session much more effective.

### **Project Focus**

The focus of my project was to create an academic coaching curriculum for middle school aged, African American boys with the goal of improving their academic engagement, self-esteem and self-efficacy. I selected this focus because in the school I work at, we have a high Somali population and I feel some of these students may be sort of "lost in the shuffle." As an African American teacher, I want to take it upon myself to coach and mentor these young men and hopefully get them thinking about some goals and dreams for their future. I do know that one of the young men I will be coaching lost his father recently and not that I can fill that void, but I can try and be a positive male figure in his life. On the other hand, with all of the social justice issues going on with our society I want these young men to be educated and resourceful and know how to put themselves in the best possible position to be successful.

### **Coaching Activity**

My main coaching activity will be the conversations we have in group sessions. There will also be some individual check ins that will take place, which most likely will be very informal. The first activity had group members examining their core values followed by answering a series of questions that focuses on their core values. Some of the questions will be answered with partners and small groups as well as with the whole group. The second set of activities dissects socio-political identities and the questions that are paired with that activity start the process of getting group members to think

critically about some of their identities. There will also be informal or formal check ins with their teachers and other staff members in the building. The informal check ins will be used as a guide to adjust to the needs of the members in group. Ultimately, we want the group members to have some autonomy in their learning and discuss topics that are important to them and their lives.

### **Supporting Research**

There is ample research which supports my reasoning for choosing leadership and academic coaching as a means to support African American middle school boys' in their academic achievement. The research from Carol Dweck (2014) and her Growth Mindset framework as well as Sharroky Hollie's (2012) work on Culturally Responsive Teaching says, when mentoring someone, it would be extremely detrimental to think that one person is fixed in his or her abilities and cannot learn and grow. During class we watched a commencement speech by Denzel Washington (2011) about taking risks and failures. During this commencement speech he discusses three reasons why it is important to take risks and what that does for us. First, Washington (2011) states, "You will fail at some point in your life and accept it." Next, Washington (2011) states, "If you don't fail you're not even trying." Lastly, Denzel (2011) says, "Sometimes taking a risk is the best way to figure out where you are going." We often times view success as to whether they got it "right" or not regardless of the process it took us to get there. Students must be able to establish and build problem-solving skills to allow them to persevere through problems they may encounter in their lives. When we look at challenges as failures, students are not as eager to put themselves out there and take risks. According to Corbett (2015), "The fact that this group of students is in crisis is evident on multiple levels,

starting with graduation rates.... U.S. high school graduation rate for black males is just 47 percent”. With the epidemic among students of color, in particular, black males, I hope my coaching can greatly impact these young males and hopefully motivate them to want to graduate.

There is also research, which comes from Brene Browns’ TED Talk-The Power of Vulnerability (2010). Brown states (2010), “Vulnerability is the birthplace of joy and creativity.” Many students are afraid to make mistakes or may feel inadequate if they do not get it “right” on their first time. The research clearly shows that students thrive and succeed in learning environments where they feel comfortable and supported and therefore are more willing to take risks.

### **Writer Background Information**

I started my career in education working as a substitute teacher at a school in North Minneapolis. Substitute teaching gave me a great foundation of what teaching would be like and a general understanding of the logistics of how schools operate. I took over for a teacher who provided extra support in math for students who were underachieving. I began in November and by that time there had already been two teachers who had quit. Needless to say, I was a little apprehensive about taking this position, but I thought it would be a great experience for me. The students I worked with were very energetic and enthusiastic and had little to no confidence or motivation to be successful. My first objective was to try and instill confidence in them in order for the students to believe they could be successful. That position was challenging for me but I was able to stick it out the rest of the year. However, I felt I made progress with the students I worked with. This is the moment for me where things really sank in and I

realized I wanted to be a teacher. This is part of the thought process behind our group, we wanted to be able to lead and support these young men through their adolescent journey.

The next year I took a Special Education Assistant position at Transition Plus, which is also a Minneapolis Public School. I worked with students who were 18-21 and had behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs. This was also challenging for me but in a very different way. These students were at the end of their education and this was their last formal opportunity for schooling before they aged out. Teaching and helping older teens and young adults also gave me the confidence in my ability to lead and many of the young men I worked with I tried to mentor and support. Working with these students is really where I solidified my love for teaching and being an educator. It was gratifying seeing these kids have success especially those kids who may not have had much success during their early educational years or who had very negative experiences in school.

After working there for three years I moved to the school I am currently at, but as a Behavior Dean. I felt as though both of my prior positions provided me the experience I needed in order to be successful as a Behavior Dean. As a dean I saw many trends in behaviors and many students were not having respect for themselves or their classmates. These encounters also provided me the experience and opportunity to mentor these young children which is what was done during our group session and curriculum development. Little did I know, I was not as prepared as I had anticipated. I spend the first month or so just trying to build relationships and getting to know the kids because without knowing them and having a relationship with them I would not have much success in my job. Once relationships were built and students trusted me, they were

eager and open to seek and accept advice. This position was much different than teaching in the classroom or being a classroom aid, as I was supporting students who were dysregulated, upset, sad, tired, hungry, poverty stricken, underserved and every emotion in between.

Much of my position was actually supporting the teachers and trying to provide strategies and guidance to help support some of their most energetic students. The position provided me a very interesting perspective because I got to see the teachers' side as well as the students' side. I was able to see how some teachers had biases towards certain students; many times the students I spent most of my time with were African American boys. One thing I noticed while working in these positions was that most of these students lacked confidence in education as well as personal self-esteem. I currently work as a Physical Education Teacher at Anne Sullivan Communication Center, which is located in Southeast Minneapolis. This is my fourth year working as a Physical Education Teacher.

### **Summary**

This project evolved into a 14-day core value/sociopolitical identity small group coaching curriculum for Black male students. I selected a coaching curriculum revolving around core values and socio-political identities because there are many young adults that are not aware their values and identities. Some of the student population in urban and inner city schools can be challenging to work with. There are many factors that affect their ability to be successful. My goal as an educator and leader is to better myself and be able to effectively serve the needs of my students. We want our youth to feel empowered and feel as though they are a contributing member of society. Starting a

group with young Black males would provide me the opportunity to directly impact their experiences and see the positive effects talking about race and culture can have on them. I am hoping that when these students meet as a group, they will be more open and eager to discuss topics that are relevant to them. The goal of this group and the coaching sessions that I am developing for this project is to empower these students to feel as though their voices are heard and their engagement, self-efficacy and self-esteem would improve. The project could be a resource for teachers, parents, social workers, administrative staff and students to help overcome some of the barriers and obstacles students face in education and also in the real world.

The stakeholders for the project will be the students in group as well as the teacher who lead the group. Much of the conversation and depth will be dependent on the level of engagement from group members. The group leader can also play a role in their engagement by creating and implementing group guidelines and expectations that everyone in group must abide by.

## **Introduction to Chapter Two**

Chapter One gave an introduction to leadership and academic coaching, project focus, explains coaching activity, explains supported research and gives background to the writer. Chapter Two will take a deeper dive into the literature review and examine, engagement, self-efficacy, self-esteem, the school-to-prison pipeline, the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programming and the benefits of small group instruction. discussed during group coaching sessions, identifying core values and strengths, building relational trust with students and using powerful questions. Chapter Three will give an in-depth description of the project.

Chapter Four will provide a reflection of the project as well as a conclusion to the paper and project.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this project is supporting African American boys in the context of education by supporting with conversations and engagements around their race, class, culture and other identities. The need for certain supports is extremely evident when looking at the statistics around academic success. According to Karp 2019, the United States' overall high school graduation rate has increased over the past several years reaching 75.2 percent in 2013. In stark contrast, the graduation rates of African American students have remained around 51%, leading to an increase in the achievement gap between African American and non-African American students (Karp, 2019). While these difficulties have been recognized since the 1970s, African American students continue to attain the lowest graduation rates among all minorities. There are many education policies and practices that have begun to push African American boys to abandon their cultures and lifestyles in order to become more "White" (Heitzeg, 2014).

My guiding question asks: *Does leadership and academic coaching paired with small peer group interaction improve Black male student academic engagement, self-efficacy and self-esteem?* This chapter serves to provide insight into the literature surrounding these topics and also provide background information into the main themes of this chapter. The themes discussed in this chapter are: academic engagement, self-efficacy, self-esteem, school-to-prison pipeline, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education and the benefits of small group interaction.

This chapter will discuss academic engagement and what that means for an African-American student in the classroom. This chapter will define academic engagement, as well as identify the factors that affect a students' academic engagement. Additionally, there will be a discussion regarding the meaning of both self-efficacy and self-esteem and what impact it can have on young African American boys' academic development and their emotional and social development. There is a national epidemic where African American boys are being unjustly punished and not provided the same consequences as other students. Much of this epidemic contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline, which will be discussed further. There is also an issue of over representation of African-American boys being identified as needing special education programming. The last topic touches on the benefits of small group instruction.

### **Academic Engagement**

*Academic engagement* is the degree to which students are committed to or involved in school and represents their daily interactions with classmates and teachers (Steinmayr, 2014). Academic engagement is a multifaceted measure that comprises of different areas of learning. When looking at academic engagement we are not looking at the specific letter grade, but the other factors that affect academics. Academic engagement plays an important role in every student's life (Steinmayr, 2014).

*Engagement* is a term that looks at students' various patterns in motivation, cognition, and behavior. There are five subcategories when looking at engagement: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, intellectual and social (Fredricks, 2004). Researchers and educators have exhibited a growing interest in the concept of engagement as a way to improve dissatisfaction, to deter student boredom, to enhance motivation and

involvement in school-related activities and to understand students' positive development (Fredricks, 2004). Engagement is also valuable in looking at the continuing process by which students drop out from school. For example, students do not just instantly decide to drop out of school, rather it is a process that happens over time.

**Behavioral engagement.** According to Fredricks, (2004), there are two ways to be behaviorally engaged. The first way is positive conduct, which is following classroom rules and regulations and not partaking in disruptive behavior. The second pertains to participation in the learning and in the academic tasks, contributing in class discussion, asking questions, paying attention and putting forth effort. To aid in this process, teachers may establish routines and rituals that help to create consistency. The teacher may also assign student roles that foster behaviors more conducive for learning.

**Cognitive engagement.** Indicators of cognitive engagement include asking questions for clarification of ideas, persistence in difficult activities, flexibility in problem solving and the use of self-regulation to support the learning process (Fredricks, 2004). Cognitive engagement refers to the students' investment in the learning process and involves aspects such as willingness and thoughtfulness to expand the effort required to understand and try to master difficult tasks. This also refers to the use of appropriate learning strategies and self-regulation skills.

**Emotional engagement.** Emotional engagement is viewed as motivational engagement. There are a variety of strategies teachers can use to promote positive emotions in students with the hope it will facilitate the learning process, minimize negative behaviors and keep students from dropping out. The thought is that students will be more likely to be successful if at least one adult in the school takes an interest in

the student and inquires about their academic and non-academic issues (Fredricks, 2004). They may also monitor moods and ask students how they are feeling in order to provide support when needed. It looks at a students' positive or negative emotional reactions towards teachers, classmates, academics and school in general.

**Intellectual engagement.** In order for teachers to increase student engagement, teachers may create lessons, provide assignments and projects that appeal to student interests or that may stimulate their curiosity. Teachers may also provide real-world and real-life examples which may spark curiosity and hopefully increase student engagement (Fredricks, 2004). In order to do this, teachers may give students choice over topics, so they can choose something that specifically interests them.

**Social engagement.** Teachers can use pairs or group work to collaboratively work on projects and assignments or teachers may also incorporate academic games that students compete in (Fredricks, 2004). Teachers and staff members can use a variety of strategies to stimulate engagement through social interactions. Social engagement also played a role in the thought process for developing our student group.

The term student engagement has widely grown in popularity in the educational field. There are many different factors that students have control over that play a large role in their social development and the learning process. In some schools some basic observable skills of engagement include attending class, listening attentively, participating in discussions, turning in work on time, and following rules and directions. Culturally responsive teaching can also be incorporated into daily activities and lessons. Culturally responsive teaching is not a single lesson or unit, it is embedded into

the day-to-day routines and rituals in the classroom. It incorporates and recognizes the students' culture and references it in all aspects of the learning process.

The following is a list of culturally responsive instructional ideas to ensure a teacher's instruction and content maintains a culturally responsive perspective. The more strategies and tactics to incorporate into your daily instruction the more impactful the instruction can be.

#### Ten Things Teachers can do to Promote Culturally Responsive Instruction

1. Validate students' cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials.
2. Acknowledge students' differences as well as their commonalities
3. Educate students about the diversity of the world.
4. Promote equity and mutual respect.
5. Assess students' ability and achievement validly.
6. Foster a positive interrelationship among students, their families, the community and school.
7. Motivate students to become active participants in their learning.
8. Encourage students to think critically.
9. Challenge students to strive for excellence.
10. Assist students in becoming socially conscious.

(Adopted from Eileen Gale Kugler, 2010)

#### **Summary**

There are many different aspects that go into academic engagement for a student. Much of the conversation is around specific things the student can do to control

their engagement. The other part of engagement is ensuring that teachers and staff members are doing their part to provide an interesting and age appropriate educational experience for the student. All too often, there are teachers who may not be willing to meet students where they are in their education or adjust lessons when students are not engaged. When looking at academic engagement, it is more of the process and interactions a student takes during their educational experience. The next section will look at self-efficacy, the definition of what it is, factors that can affect one's self-efficacy and how it can affect a student's educational experience.

### **Self-Efficacy**

*Self-efficacy* is an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to complete specific tasks (Relojo, 2017). It is a reflection in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior and social environment. One of the most critical tools in a teacher's arsenal actually belongs to the student: self-efficacy. Increasing student self-efficacy, therefore, is crucial to a student's success. Depending on the level of one's self-efficacy, that will determine how long their adversities will last when they encounter them. There is a particular belief that self-efficacy plays a huge role in determining our ability to succeed or not (Akhtar, 2008). Another aspect of self-efficacy is that individuals make use of their judgments in reference to a goal. This section will further discuss what self-efficacy is and what students can do to build their self-efficacy.

A student's self-efficacy may play an important role in his or her academic achievement. According to Bandura (2004), self-efficacy affects the amount of effort and persistence that a person devotes to a task. In any learning situation, students enter with a

sense of efficacy that is based on their past experiences. Students who have established high levels of self-efficacy over the course of many experiences are unlikely to suffer lowered self-efficacy as the result of negative performance feedback (Haskell, 2016). The more confident students are in their capacity to learn, the more active they will be in the learning process. Self-efficacy theory predicts that students work harder and longer when they judge themselves as capable rather than when they judge themselves as unable to perform a task (Kirk, 2018). That seems to be fairly accurate for most aspects of education; when a student deems themselves capable, they are much more willing to try and complete any given task.

Self-efficacy is an important variable in education because it has a direct impact on a student's motivation to learn. There are four factors that affect a student's ability to ensure their self-efficacy thrives in the classroom: learning from others' experience, previous performance, social persuasion, and physiological factors (Artino, 2017).

**Learning from others' experience.** When we can see people similar to us succeed by a concentrated effort, it reinforces the belief that we also possess those capabilities to have success (Artino, 2012). If students can observe and surround themselves with others who have success, their likelihood of succeeding greatly increases, especially when those they observe are considered role models.

**Previous performance.** The power of praise is beneficial in helping to build up self-efficacy (Artino, 2012). If a student has been successful and has been rewarded for it, that student will begin to believe in themselves and they will have the ability to execute the same skills needed. Relajo (2017) states, "Nothing breeds success like success!"

**Social persuasion.** Discouragement is more effective at decreasing self-efficacy than encouragement is at increasing it, but both play a crucial role for in the developmental process (Artino, 2012). No matter how dismal a situation might be it is essential for that teacher to try and stay as positive as possible. Trying to salvage something positive out of those situations helps the student “save face” and not be totally embarrassed.

**Physiological factors.** Having the ability to control anxiety or minimize it may have a positive impact on self-efficacy beliefs (Artino, 2012). Some students may experience stress or anxiety when having to take a test or give a speech to the class. This is a way that students interpret and evaluate their emotional state and it is beneficial for how they develop self-efficacy beliefs. Anxiety is an expected emotion in education, but not allowing it to affect your ability to succeed is essential.

Having a high self-efficacy results in greater success and better mental health. Some students have learned through repeated failures they will not be successful at school and are not good at it (Stajkovic, 1998). Students may show this by shutting down or acting out to prevent themselves from having struggles in the classroom. Feedback from parents and teachers can positively or negatively aid in that process. Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves with difficult tasks (Haskell, 2016). Those particular students will put forth a high degree of effort in order to meet their goals and if they do not meet their goals, they attribute it to things in their control. Students with high self-efficacy are able to bounce back quicker from setbacks and are more likely to achieve their goals. On the contrary, students with low self-efficacy believe they cannot be successful and are less likely to put

forth much effort and may look at challenging tasks as threats (Kirk, 2018). Therefore, students with poor self-efficacy have particularly low aspirations for their academic experience and that becomes part of a self-fulfilling negative feedback cycle.

**Teaching strategies.** It is particularly exciting to note that teaching strategies used in the classroom can and do make a difference on students' self-efficacy. Teachers can stimulate comprehension and critical thinking and therefore increase student self-efficacy through a variety of strategies such as dialogue, open-ended questioning and positive reinforcement. Research also shows that the type of learning environment and teaching method can improve self-efficacy in the classroom (Bandura, 2004). Short term goals that are specific yet attainable, but still a challenge can be most beneficial. Often times, students do not know what to do when they come across a difficult problem because they may lack self-efficacy. They do not have the strategies or abilities to help themselves persevere and keep going. For adults, figuring out what to do when work gets challenging can be second nature, but for students, they need to be taught skills and strategies to keep them going.

### **Summary**

In summary, this literature on self-efficacy shows that it is not a fixed or pre-set skill and can always be built up or broken down depending on the teacher's actions. It is important to implement certain strategies and skills in order to maximize the self-efficacy in our students. It is essential for young people, especially underachieving students, to feel as though they are worthy of having success and part of that feeling comes from their peers and teachers. We know self-efficacy plays a huge role in one's ability to experience success. Self-efficacy not only plays a role in school, but also affects a

student's personal life. As a teacher it is important to create a safe and welcoming environment so students can have the best opportunity to be successful. The next topic discussed will look at what self-esteem looks like in young students and also ways to build up and sustain a high level of self-esteem.

### **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem refers to a person's beliefs about their own worth and value, and also has to do with the feelings people experience that follow from their sense of worthiness and unworthiness (Oswalt, 2010). Self-esteem is about how much children feel valued, appreciated, accepted, loved and having a good sense of self-image and self-worth. Those who have high self-esteem are motivated to take care of themselves and thrive to achieve personal goals and aspirations. When children believe they are valuable and important they tend to take better care of themselves. Self-esteem is also valuable for students who may not have as much success in school. To be successful in teaching African American students, Shore (2011) indicated it is critical teachers find ways to raise students' self-esteem. It is essential for them to believe in themselves and have confidence in their abilities. If they can do that, they are more likely to problem solve and persevere. This section will define self-esteem and what students can do to try and raise their self-esteem level. There will be ideas and strategies provided to help build and sustain a high level of self-esteem for students.

### **Academic Learning & Self Esteem**

Brooks (2016) notes that individuals with low self esteem often suffer from feelings of inferiority and depression. Self-esteem is influenced massively by a person's experiences. Positive experiences increase one's self-esteem while negative experiences

do the opposite. In childhood, parents, the school they attend and the environment they live in have the most impact since children are very impressionable and are starting to learn new skills and values (Omero, 2012). Those that have had positive experiences both at school and at home do not necessarily suffer from low self-esteem. Self-esteem is a life-long skill needed for young people and we as teachers and adults need to understand the important role we play in helping to build and maintain that high self-esteem (Brooks, 2016). One could argue that self-esteem is indeed critical to academic success. There is an understanding that self-esteem is a measure of a human beings' acceptance. In order for an individual to have high self-esteem, they need to perceive themselves as understood, respected and useful (Watson, 2017). When students feel good about themselves, they are more likely to become better achievers in the classroom. Implementing an optimistic attitude and creating an environment where students feel trusted and valued builds students' confidence (Watson, 2017). In order to help improve self-esteem, we have to be careful in the way feedback is delivered because teachers should praise a student's effort and strategy. Self-esteem is a very important component in almost every aspect of a child's life and what they do (Taylor, 2016). Not only does a high self-esteem help with academic performance, it also supports social skills and makes it easier for children to maintain and keep healthy relationships. A child with a high self-esteem is also better equipped to handle mistakes, disappointment and failures.

### **Teaching Strategies**

This section will discuss strategies to help build and sustain a high level of self-esteem with students. There are a few strategies listed and some may work well and some may not be as effective. In order to for these to be effective there needs to be

thorough consistency. It can not be tried one or two times; it needs to be tried several times in order to give it a chance to work.

**Be open about flaws or weaknesses.** This realization that everyone makes mistakes helps students accept themselves and build self-esteem (Taylor, 2016). Teachers can take advantage of opportunities by changing the belief that perfection is the key to high self-esteem. We as teachers are humans that have flaws and make mistakes. They show our students that we, too, make mistakes and it is quite alright.

**Show your true colors.** The more we are able to exhibit our own confidence in the classroom, that encourages our students' self-esteem (Watson, 2017). Learning occurs when students are willing to take risks in the classroom. With that being said, taking risks is also a sign of confidence. In order to support students around honesty, confidence and authenticity in the classroom, we must model and practice it ourselves.

**This too shall pass.** Teachers can explain to their students about trying to look past certain adversities in order to foster higher self-esteem. By sharing our weaknesses, exhibiting authenticity and discussing our changes in our self-esteem, teachers have the ability to lead by example and promote positive self-images in our students (Oswalt, 2010). Genuine discussions about how to look past problems and put things into perspective should nurture a positive and optimistic outlook. Teachers need to show students that we as adults can relate to our students and also have the ability to build up our own self esteem. To be able to show students that we as adults and teachers can relate to their insecurities is beneficial and that teachers have the ability to build up our self-esteem over time.

## **Summary**

In summary, self-esteem refers to one's belief in their self-worth and their value. There are many strategies and tactics that can be implemented to help children build and sustain their self-esteem. Not only does self-esteem affect one's academic success but it also affects one's social and emotional abilities. Similarly to self-efficacy, self-esteem is something that can change and be built upon depending on the environment that is created in the classroom and the climate a teacher creates. If students feel valued and trusted, they are more likely to step out of their comfort zone and take risks. Teachers and adults play an integral role in helping to build and maintain high levels of self-esteem in students. The next section will discuss the school-to-prison pipeline epidemic that has been created in our educational system.

## **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Hundreds of school districts across the country employ discipline policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at alarming rates—a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Many of these policies were initiated because of a need for safety and security, but in turn have increased the risk of criminalization, particularly for students of color (Amurao, 2015). The school-to-prison pipeline is the direct result of educational policies and practices that have transformed our schools from sites of opportunity and inclusion into centers of criminalization and exclusion (Heitzeg, 2014). This school-to-prison pipeline is a consequence of schools that criminalize minor disciplinary infractions. With that said, many schools are adopting zero tolerance policies; have police and or security officers present; and enforce suspensions, expulsions and arrests for minor infractions (Heitzeg,

2014). According to Amurao (2015), statistics reflect that these policies disproportionately target students of color and those with a history of abuse, neglect, poverty or learning disabilities. Often times when students are removed from school, they are sent back to homes or neighborhoods which may be unsafe and filled with negative influences. There is not a specific reason as to why this school-to-prison pipeline epidemic has started but many believe it is due to the zero tolerance policies derived from the Columbine High School massacre (Amurao, 2015). Those students who are forced out of school become stigmatized and fall behind in their academics. This stigmatization can lead to increased risk of dropping out of school or committing crimes in the community (Amurao, 2015). For a growing number of students, the path to incarceration starts with failing public schools, zero tolerance and other school discipline policies, police in school hallways, disciplinary alternative schools, and court involvement and juvenile detention centers (Figlio, 2006). While zero tolerance was initially intended to address serious offenses such as deadly weapons, assault, possession/sale of illegal drugs, the bulk of the suspensions are for minor infractions (Heitzeg, 2014). Students who are suspended are not given the opportunity for adequate educational services or could be referred to an alternative school.

Increased drop-out rates are directly related to repeated use of suspension and expulsion. These students are also much more likely to have poor academic performance and eventually drop out of school.

Heitzeg (2014) stated the following:

The National Center for Education Statistics documents this: 31 percent of high school sophomores that dropped out of school had been suspended three or more times, a rate much higher than for those who had not been suspended at all. (p. 68)

**Who is in the pipeline?** Students from two groups—racial minorities and children with disabilities—are disproportionately represented in the school-to-prison pipeline. African-American students, for instance, are 3.5 times more likely than their Caucasian classmates to be suspended or expelled, according Wright (2018). For students with disabilities, the numbers are equally troubling. One report found that while 8.6 percent of public school children have been identified as having disabilities that affect their ability to learn, these students make up 32 percent of youth in juvenile detention centers. The racial disparities are even greater for students with disabilities. About 1 in 4 black children with disabilities were suspended at least once, versus 1 in 11 white students (Amurao, 2015). Black children constitute 18 percent of students, but they account for 46 percent of those suspended more than once (Heitzeg, 2014).

**Punishing policies.** The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) advocates for changes to end the school-to-prison pipeline and has filed lawsuits or civil rights complaints against districts with punitive discipline practices that are discriminatory in impact. The SPLC deputy legal director said this surge in police on campus has helped to criminalize many students and fill the pipeline. One 2005 study found that children are far more likely to be arrested at school than they were a generation ago (Amurao, 2015). The vast majority of these arrests are for nonviolent offenses and in most cases, the students are simply being disruptive.

According to Meitrodt (2013):

For many young people, our schools are increasingly a gateway to the criminal justice system. This phenomenon is a consequence of a culture of zero tolerance that is widespread in our schools and is depriving many children of their fundamental right to an education. (p. 86)

**Best practices.** Instead of pushing children out, Gordon (2017) said, “Teachers need a lot more support and training for effective discipline, and schools need to use best practices for behavior modification to keep these kids in school where they belong” (p. 36). Teachers can also incorporate culturally responsive instruction into their teaching.

Keeping at-risk kids in class can be a tough order for educators under pressure to meet accountability measures, but classroom teachers are in a unique position to divert students from the school-to-prison pipeline (Amurao, 2015). Students need to understand there are consequences for their actions, while educators need to work to rehabilitate children and not incriminate them. Teachers know their students better than any resource officer or administrator—which puts them in a singularly empowered position to keep students in the classroom (Omero, 2012). It’s not easy, but when teachers take a more responsive and less punitive approach in the classroom, students are more likely to complete their education.

There are many schools and districts that have adopted or revised their disciplinary policies, which distinguish between a minor and major infraction which encourage a non-punitive approach to discipline (Amurao, 2015). Also, several other school districts have done away from the punishment-centered approach and put an emphasis on restorative justice models such as peace circle and talking circles which

create a positive school culture and climate. According to Ferlazzo (2016), the restorative justice model is an innovative approach to discipline where the focus lies on repairing the harm done. The emphasis is more on learning from the harm and how that affects the community members.

Amurao (2015) highlights common scenarios that push young people into the school-to-prison pipeline and offers practical advice for how teachers can dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

**Avoiding the pipeline.** How can school districts divert the school-to-prison pipeline?

1. Increase the use of positive behavior interventions and supports.
2. Compile annual reports on the total number of disciplinary actions that push students out of the classroom based on gender, race and ability.
3. Create agreements with police departments and court systems to limit arrests at school and the use of restraints, such as mace and handcuffs.
4. Provide simple explanations of infractions and prescribed responses in the student code of conduct to ensure fairness.
5. Create appropriate limits on the use of law enforcement in public schools.
6. Train teachers on the use of positive behavior supports for at-risk students.

When looking at Minneapolis Public Schools, Black students are suspended an inordinate number of times compared to white students. Nationally, Black students are suspended three times as often as their white peers; in Minnesota, it is eight times as often (Green, 2018). In 2017, Black students were 41 percent of the overall student population, but made up 76 percent of the suspensions (Green, 2018). Many civil rights groups feel as though these suspensions are helping to drive the achievement gap between white and

minority students further apart. Green also states that suspensions and expulsions are also linked to the disproportionate number of minority students in the criminal justice system. In Minneapolis, as in other districts, discipline policies are a daily struggle to balance safety and statistics, and the uncomfortable truth about how race may be clouding the educators' perception of both (Green, 2018).

Green (2018) found the following:

Former Minneapolis Public Schools superintendent, Bernadeia Johnson launched her own review of the discipline referrals for kindergarten boys and the findings were alarming. The descriptions of white children by their teachers included “gifted but can’t use his words” and “high strung,” with their actions excused because they “had a hard day.” Black children, she said, were “destructive” and “violent,” and “cannot be managed.” “When you see something like that and you’re a leader, and you’re trying to figure out how to move the school system forward it was alarming,” Ms. Johnson said. (p. 2)

One of the challenges facing African American students is the historical effect of education on assimilation and resulting loss of culture (Lynch, 2015). Incentives that work for many students in the mainstream school (i.e. high grades, enjoyment of competition) are not motivating in the same manner for many African American learners. Increasing intrinsic motivation is of importance for this population as they tend to learn information that is personally relevant and of interest to them (Lynch, 2015). It is the teacher’s job to adapt their lessons and content to meet the needs of every student in their classroom.

## **Summary**

To summarize, we want to continue to challenge policies that encourage police presence at schools, harsh tactics including physical restraint, and automatic punishments that result in suspensions and out-of-class time are huge contributors to the pipeline, but the problem is more complex than that. The school-to-prison pipeline starts (or is best avoided) in the classroom. When combined with zero-tolerance policies, a teacher's decision to refer students for punishment can mean they are pushed out of the classroom—and much more likely to be introduced into the criminal justice system. The era of criminalized educational settings, of zero tolerance and heavily policed schools, has created no solutions, but instead, pathways to prison. This system has not seemed to work and there needs to be some changes made. There are strategies mentioned to help some of the problems associated with the school-to-prison pipeline epidemic. Many of the solutions are not quick fixes, but if there is authentic buy-in from all stakeholders then steps can be made in the right direction. We know that a zero tolerance approach in the educational system is not conducive for success for some of our more troubled students. The next section will look at the over representation of African American students in special education.

## **Overrepresentation in Special Education**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) aims to address equity by race and ethnicity. According to Corbett (2015), African American students are being placed in special education programming based solely on their race. The result of such a disproportionate placement is a gross overrepresentation of Black students, especially Black males, and an underrepresentation of Black males in gifted and talented

educational programs (Corbett, 2015). Of the Minnesota students who are sent to highly restrictive environments, nearly 90% are Black and few are ever transferred out of those placements and back into less restrictive environments (Agoetz, 2015). As of 2012, two of the most restrictive schools in Minnesota had a combined student population of 10 white students and 133 Black students, with the Black students suspended 435 times in just one year (Agoetz, 2015). This disproportionality can be seen primarily in the emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) setting, which is a subjective classification. In many cases it can be an “easy out” for students who are deemed unmanageably disruptive but have no other diagnosis. This overrepresentation is not a new issue in Minnesota or nationally and it reflects decades of discrimination and racial bias.

African American males represent a significantly disproportionate percentage of special education students, particularly in Minnesota. In many of these highly restrictive environments, there is little to no “real” education that is taking place (Meitrodt, 2013). In Minnesota, more than four percent of all Black students are identified as EBD: a rate that is more than three times the national average and is the highest of any state (Meitrodt, 2013). The data mentioned in many of the articles found strongly suggests that merely being a Black male in public schools puts them at risk of being placed in special education without justification.

**What is being done?** Districts are trying to establish programs to encourage traditional school attendance for African American males to hopefully increase the chances of transitioning into a new school or placement setting. Schools are also starting to recognize the need to provide African American students with challenging and engaging work to help steer them away from special education services, unless there is a

serious need (Gordon, 2017). If the gaps between groups exceed state-determined thresholds for “significant disproportionality,” the state must examine local policies and require the district to devote more of its federal special education funds to early intervention (Gordon, 2017). The disproportionality consistently states that a child’s outcome is affected by out of school factors such as poor nutrition and stress. These influences generally affect children of color and those living in poverty. Black children are three times as likely to live in poverty as white children.

### **Summary**

In summary, the fact of the matter is there are too many African American students being forced into special education programs or alternative school settings. This is not only a state issue, but also a national issue. Once a student is placed with a special education label or school setting, their chances of dropping out greatly increase (Meitrodt, 2013). Often times alternative settings are not as educationally engaging and challenging and those students have a difficult time getting back on track. There were some alarming statistics provided about the rate at which minority, and specifically Black students are put into special education programs. There are certainly many situations where a student being placed in special education is warranted and will greatly benefit the child, but there are other situations where a child is placed in special education because a school simply is fed-up or does not know what else to do with a student. Legislation and district initiatives need to continue progressing to ensure teachers are doing what we can to keep minority students out of special education and alternative education settings. There are other factors that can help Black students avoid those special education routes and it can be from small group instruction.

## **Small Group Instruction**

Students can get thrown into large classes and situations where they feel as though they do not have a voice, or the larger settings can be intimidating to them. The hope is that a smaller group allows for more intimate and impactful conversations around race and culture. There is research that shows students who work in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and they retain more information than in a large group (Barkley, 2005). Another important aspect of group work is being transparent and making sure to share the end goals or learning targets with the group. The learning should not be a mystery and all stakeholders should be in the know with what is going on. According to Brame (2015), there are many instructors and educators who use group work to enhance their students' learning. There are many benefits from peer to peer interaction and having small groups aims to utilize those benefits. The thought is that when individuals are engaged and invested in the learning, it benefits the whole group and overall performance increases. According to Kuh (2007), cooperative learning helps to enhance academic performance and student engagement. Jaques (2018) states that small group work can help students develop problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal relational skills and team leadership. Not only will these skills aid in education, but they are lifelong skills that translate to many different aspects of life. For project and conversation to be most productive, expectations should be clearly explained.

## **Challenges**

Group work is not all productive at times and absolutely comes with some challenges as well. Depending on the size of the group there may be a lack of perspectives or diversity. If group members do not build a working relationship, group

members may not be as comfortable to share personal information or have courageous conversations. According to Brame (2015), students who are not as eager to engage in conversation may feel pressured to participate. Some teachers have certain strengths that may hinder their ability to adopt student centered instruction.

### **Writer Rationale**

All of the topics discussed in this chapter directly correlate to the success of African American boys in school and in life. Many of the students do not come to school equipped with the skills to help them be successful, and if they do have the skills, they choose not to use them in an appropriate way. Furthermore, there are stereotypes and social justice epidemics that also negatively affect their ability to be successful. If teachers and support staff can have the knowledge and skills to be able to instill in the students strategies to help them be successful and persevere, they will have much more of a chance to maintain success. This is not an easy task and nothing will change instantaneously; the rate that African Americans are being incarcerated and dropping out of school is alarming. The chapter provided many different statistics that support this national epidemic on our hands. The chapter also provided many different strategies to instill and establish in our classrooms to help this particular race and culture succeed. With that being said, it is not solely on teachers and the education system; the students themselves need to do their part to open themselves up to learn and be vulnerable and approachable. Often times students burn bridges or lose interest before there is even an opportunity for the teacher to establish a relationship. If students stay academically engaged, have a high self-efficacy and a high self-esteem, that does not mean they will automatically be successful but they will be much more equipped to

handle all of life's educational obstacles and problems that arise. Having these skills is not all a student needs in order to have success but it puts the student in a much better position than if they did not possess the skills.

### **Summary**

The guiding question asks, *does leadership and academic coaching paired with small peer group interaction improve Black male student academic engagement, self-efficacy and self-esteem?* There are many ways to be academically engaged in the classroom: behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, intellectually and socially. Self-efficacy actually has a direct influence on academic motivation and engagement. It is defined as how well one can complete a certain task. Self-esteem examines one's worth and value and having a sense of worthiness. Having a growth mindset as opposed to a fixed mindset can also help to establish and maintain a high self-esteem. Many of the educational policies and practices established now are a direct result as to why there are so many males of color incarcerated or dropping out of school. Schools are criminalizing students for minor incidents which could be handled in a different more restorative way. Another theme looked at in this chapter is the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programming. The statistics are also alarming in regards to the number of African American males who are being placed in special education programs and highly restrictive special education schools. Some schools and districts are trying to provide a more engaging educational experience with the hopes that it will keep students out of special education programming due to behavioral needs. The last section in this chapter touches on the benefits of small group interaction.

### **Introduction to Chapter 3**

The next chapter will look at the project and what it entails. The conversations during whole group time and partner discussions will be used as an informal data point. Academic engagement can look different from student to student. Students need to advocate for themselves, but teachers also need to adjust to meet the needs of their students. Equipping the group members with the skills to be able to articulate their needs will aid them in their educational journey. The information around the school-to-prison-pipeline sparked the thoughts and ideas for developing our curriculum for small group instruction. The statistics state this epidemic has a direct impact on young Black males. We wanted to outfit group members with the skills to handle themselves in all situations they encounter in their life. This chapter laid the groundwork for the project and provided a nice foundation for the development of the project.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This chapter will provide an overview of the project. It examines the curriculum framework and focus, explains the intended audience and provides a detailed project description. There is a section that addresses the desired outcomes for the students. All of these discussions aim to establish a foundation for the reader to understand where the writer's perspective lies. My guiding question asks: *Does leadership and academic coaching paired with small peer group interaction improve Black male student academic engagement, self-efficacy and self-esteem?* This chapter will conclude with an introduction to Chapter Four.

#### **Project Overview**

The original project plan grew out of my experience running a similar group in 2017, that looked at increasing academic engagement, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Based on the data collected through surveys, coaching sessions and group discussions, it did not provide the results that were anticipated.

This project evolved into a curriculum for a 14-day core value/sociopolitical identity small group coaching curriculum for Black male students. There are two manuals that were developed. One of the manuals is a student manual which could be used with the students and the group leader could also tweak and make more applicable

to them. There is also a teacher manual which has more detail and would be something that only the group leader would use. Similar to textbook teacher manuals, this manual provides different perspectives and alternative options for answering questions. This curriculum is a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal reflection with group leader and classmates with the goal of increasing our understanding of the impact our class, race, culture, and other identities have on our educational experience and also in the real world. Most, if not all group sessions were held in a circle discussion format. A circle format means that everyone in group sits in a circle during discussion time, the person holding the talking piece is the only person talking. In this project, there are individual activities coupled with group activities and also question and answer activities. The group members are challenged to think critically and ask tough questions, but also asked to think authentically and have courageous conversations.

### **Curriculum Framework**

The research design used to develop the project is McTighe's and Wiggins Understanding by Design model (2008). This model looks at the learning goals first and then adapts lessons and content according to those learning goals. According to Bowen (2017), the learning goals encompass the skills and what instructors want their students to learn. We knew where we wanted group to go we just needed to adjust lesson content and pace accordingly. The group project was initiated when we decided what we wanted our end results to be. Then, we determined how we were going to assess and collect our evidence. After determining our form of assessments we looked at lesson content and activities that would align with those assessments. The ultimate goal we wanted for our group members was for them to feel comfortable talking about their race, culture and

identity. Being able to have such conversations allowed the group members to be better equipped to handle adverse situations that may arise in their personal life or educational world. This framework was selected because it allowed us flexibility in our instruction and its format seemed to be the most effective and efficient way to present the information to group members.

### **Desired Outcomes**

The desired outcome for the group is for African American students to feel understood in the context of their culture and racial identity which in turn will support engagement with peers in the school community and academic growth. This writer is optimistic the students who participate in this group will feel understood and connected to their community at school, resulting in higher attendance, lessened disruptive behaviors and increased self-esteem.

### **Method/Timeline**

This project evolved into a curriculum for a 14-day core value/sociopolitical identity small group coaching curriculum for Black male students. It was essential to implement something that is impactful yet also practical for educators to use. The hope for this group is that with repeated cycles of planning, observing and reflecting, the participants participating in this project can implement change (Phaneuf, 2019). Ideally this group would run throughout the course of a school year or a semester. There are other factors that can affect the groups' ability to be able to meet, so group facilitators should ensure to get a timeline started. Facilitators need to make sure the sessions flow together and transitions are smooth, but also need to allow time for reflection and observation. Periodically, there were individual check-ins with group members, which were very quick and informal.

**Audience**

The intended audience for this project is 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students. This group was designed to consist of all boys but the group leader could certainly entertain the idea of having an all girls group or a mixed gender group. As long as guidelines and expectations are clearly explained and followed, groups could absolutely include mixed genders and races as well. Ideally, it would be nice if facilitator could hand pick the group to ensure they know the students would have an interest in the topics of conversation and also students that have trust with group leader and that relationship is reciprocated as well. This grade level was chosen because those are the age ranges where students initially have those thoughts about their race and culture. Not to say that lower elementary students are not aware of those things, but when students get to upper elementary or middle school, those topics play more of a role in their experiences in and out of school. They are also able to have discussions around their race and culture based on their experiences and things they have seen. This age range seems to be an appropriate age range to begin having authentic and courageous discussions to take place. When talking about some of the topics that are addressed in the curriculum, it is also important to make sure the students have a level of respect for themselves and their classmates. Creating a safe and non-judgmental environment is essential for any group to operate efficiently and authentically. The group works better when group members are invested and willing to take risks when having conversations about race, culture, ethnicity and society. This is a tool that can also be used with adults and professional colleagues. This could be used as a year-long staff development to get conversations started for staff

around race and equity. This would not be something to be used in a regular classroom setting, but could potentially be better off with a small group of students. There are absolutely some individual activities that a teacher could use with their whole class but not the whole manual.

### **Project Description**

Each day is designed to be about 20-30 minutes and is intended to be spread out over a period of time. The reason for the shorter amount of time is because my group met during lunch and that was about all the time we were allotted. This group could also be completed as a before or after school program. The most important part about the project is the conversations between individual group members and as a whole group. Following the timeline is not imperative; it acts as more of a guide and provides flexibility where the group leader feels necessary. The conversations and experiences for the group should be authentic but also flow together so they can see the correlation between what is talked about in group sessions and their real world experiences. Group sessions should pick up seamlessly from where they left off.

### **Context for Project Completion**

The project took place during the school day, with a couple individual meetings held after or before school depending on students' schedule. The group met in a classroom during most of the group sessions. For the individual sessions, they were held in a conference room, office space or just a quick check-in, in the hallway. The group meetings mainly consisted of core value discussions, sociopolitical identity discussions, social justice issues, equity/race and other topics the group was interested in discussing. There were many times we went off on a tangent or a group member was having a vulnerable moment and sharing something personal and we did not want to

diminish that moment for that group member. The main purpose of group was to create an environment that was safe and comfortable for the students to talk about issues they felt were important to them. When they wanted to talk about those things the schedules agenda took a back seat and honestly those conversations were more impactful than some of our other discussions. It was also explained to them that we might not have an answer for a certain question, but as a group we could brainstorm answers or try to come up with something together. We did not want group members to think we had the answer for everything, in fact, letting them know that we did not have the answers for everything validated us even more. The hope is that this group provided an opportunity for the students to discuss topics they may not have been comfortable talking about in class or with their classroom teachers, but are topics that are applicable to their daily lives.

#### **Introduction to Chapter Four**

The final chapter will take the research and literature and examine it as a whole through a racial equity/diversity lens. The chapter will revisit the information provided in the literature review. There will be discussions around key learnings, limitations, the results of the project and professional implications. The final chapter will also provide some framework to potentially keep the conversations going and staying in touch with group members.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

When my capstone project initially started I looked at academic and leadership coaching and its impact on students' academic engagement, self-efficacy and self-esteem. As the capstone evolved through group sessions the project transitioned more into looking at core values and being able to create something practical that teachers could use. This final chapter will examine and re-visit the literature review, the key learnings from the project, the limitations of the project, the professional implications this project could have and lastly a conclusion wrapping everything up. The capstone project aligns with the guiding question: *Does leadership and academic coaching paired with small peer group interaction improve Black male student academic engagement, self efficacy and self esteem?*

I was privileged enough with the opportunity to facilitate small group coaching with African American male students in 2017. The results did not display what was expected and that left a wondering as to why. The results that I am referencing are the student self-esteem scale surveys, teacher surveys, behavior data and attendance data. After talking with the group about certain topics, I realized they were not in tune with their identities and how their identities helped them navigate in society. Those conversations helped me to start developing this current project which examines core values and sociopolitical identities. There are many different components that went into

the completion of the project. The most important and integral part was the students and discussions we had in group. Being aware of their identities and being able to talk amongst their peers was a tremendous asset to our group. The conversations we had were impactful and meaningful and group members seemed to gain a lot from our sessions.

This project evolved into a curriculum for a 14-day core value/sociopolitical identity small group for Black male students. The 14 days consist of individual activities, partner activities as well as whole group discussion. Most of our group sessions took place in a circle format. The common theme with the many different activities completed in group was authentically looking at their own race, culture, ethnicity, class, and analyzing how that helps them navigate through their educational world.

### **Revisit of the Literature**

The literature review looked at academic engagement, self-efficacy, self-esteem, the school to prison pipeline, the overrepresentation of Black males in special education and the benefits of small group instruction. Teaching students to embrace their race and culture and in doing so that can help them avoid getting a potential pre-mature label. It also equips the students with the tools and skills to navigate successfully in society. The literature review has a lot of information but it really lays the foundation for the guiding question of the project. The most impactful parts of the literature review were the sections on the school-to-prison pipeline and the overrepresentation of black males in special education. According to Amurao (2015), statistics reflect that these policies disproportionately target students of color and those with a history of abuse, neglect, poverty or learning disabilities. The school-to-prison pipeline is the direct result of educational policies and practices that have transformed our schools from sites of

opportunity and inclusion into centers of criminalization and exclusion (Heitzeg, 2014). This manual can be a tool that can be a direct impact on not only a students experience but also a teachers practice.

There are many factors that play a role in that overrepresentation, some being in the students control and some of the factors are out of their control. For a growing number of students, the path to incarceration starts with failing public schools, zero tolerance and other school discipline policies, police in school hallways, disciplinary alternative schools, and court involvement and juvenile detention centers (Figlio, 2006). Having a better understanding of their core values and sociopolitical identities helps them to avoid these paths. As teachers, we want to also provide the students with the skills to handle adverse situations, we know it is inevitable and handling adversity is something we all have to do.

### **Key Learnings**

The main learning for me as a researcher is if you do not get desirable results, or the results you were looking for that does not mean the project was a failure. It was absolutely unexpected that the data from the original coaching group trended the way it did, but it allowed an opportunity to think about why this happened. The data is referencing a self-esteem survey done by students and teachers, behavior tracking data and attendance data. Naturally, there was also conversations around what could have been done different. That reflection sparked the ideas for the project and the implementation of it spring-boarded from there.

As a learner it was evident to me the more transparent I was with the kids in group, the more receptive and more willing they were to share in group. It was also

apparent that for some students in group having those open and honest conversations was difficult. Some members of the group shared things with the group that they had not shared with anyone before. This is also a place where being transparent played a huge role in our group dynamic. I would let the students know that I understood having some of those conversations was extremely difficult and I appreciated them sharing that. Often times, I did not have the answer and many times they were not looking for an answer, just someone to hear what they were saying and not judging them. Along with that is understanding and creating a non-judgmental/safe environment for the group helps spark those conversations. Once there was trust built amongst all group members, the students were extremely eager to talk and share their experiences around their culture and identity. Guidelines, expectations and group norms were established early on and were re-visited often in our first few group sessions. Establishing those guidelines early is essential for trust which in turn provides meaningful conversation. The students had a voice in helping to create the guidelines and expectations and then we used that as our “contract” for group sessions. The contract is not essential, but highly recommended as it can be a very valuable tool for accountability. Letting the students have a voice in their group allowed for them to take ownership and accountability, therefore making the group sessions much more authentic. One of the more impactful moments of group was when I had the students bring in their own talking piece for group. It was absolutely amazing to see some of the things the students brought in and it was equally as impactful to learn about why that piece was so special to them. It is also encouraged to use a similar strategy and have the students bring in something special to them to use as a talking piece one day for the talking circle..

## **Limitations**

The main limitation for this project was being able to find students that were willing and wanted to partake in such a group. Also, there are many teachers that are not comfortable talking about equity, race and culture. There were relationships built between student and teacher which allowed the trust part of the group to develop much faster. It may take much longer to build and develop that trust with students you are not as familiar with. Ideally, this would be best done with a hand picked group of students that the teachers know are comfortable and willing to having difficult conversations about their race, culture and identity.

There are some potential policy implications with my project. In one of the sociopolitical identity activities, the students are looking at sexual orientation as well as religion. Looking at those two identities could have policy implications. This is part of the reason why group members were hand picked because I did not want to intrude on any of the student's personal lives or make them feel uncomfortable. I knew that these students trusted me and would have open and honest conversations about their race and cultural identities.

## **Next Steps**

This manual will be shared with colleagues and classmates. My hope is that it is used as a practical "real-world" curriculum manual for teachers to start talking about race, culture and ethnicity. This can be shared between schools and administrators. In order to be most effective there has to be some level of comfort when talking about race and culture with young students. There will be many opportunities to run other small groups using the same materials from this project. Hopefully small group will run

equally as smooth and we will have the opportunity to have in depth conversations again. I would like to investigate this small group curriculum with female and males together. I think there is certainly a perspective that a female may provide that could be enlightening for Black males to hear. I also wonder if having other races and cultures could provide a different set of obstacles and experiences to discuss. These are all questions that I will have the opportunity to answer as I continue to navigate through my professional journey.

There was so much learned about my own identity and also so much about the students I had in group and their identities. The results will be used to help me better work with and understand minority students and students from other races. Having an understanding of where people come from and what their culture is about helps to better ease the transition into mainstream classrooms.

### **Professional Implications**

This project is a benefit to the profession because it allows teachers to gain a better understanding of where their students come from and how they view themselves based on their identities. Like stated before, this is not an activity that would be great with a full classroom, but if there are a certain group of students the teacher feels comfortable enough with to have conversations about race, class, culture and gender then it is encouraged for teachers to try because they will learn so much more about their students. Being the same race of the students I had in group was a luxury but absolutely not a necessity. Actually, it could be beneficial to not be of the same race and culture because there would be a different perspective presented.

## **Conclusion**

Racial equity is a huge topic right now in education and this project aims at trying to address some of those inequities in education while also trying to equip the students in group with the tools and skills to help them navigate through their educational experiences positively. We want our youth to be outstanding citizens and a true asset to our society. In conjunction with that, we want to give them the best chance to be successful and have an opportunity to be the best they can be. We want our students to be able to handle themselves with class and dignity. Ultimately, the hope is that the learning that takes place in group will help support the students in continuing to find opportunities to uphold equity in their classrooms, with their friends and in their community. The learning will look different with each student. Depending on where the group is when they start will be a huge determining factor as to where they finish. Being a male of color and being able to have a direct impact on a young person life is irreplaceable. There were many African Americans before me who helped pave the way so that I could have this platform to make a difference. I want our youth to be outstanding citizens and amazing contributors to society. This project was developed to help young Black males feel as though they have a voice and are able to have authentic and courageous conversations about race, culture and identity.

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