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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

IT'S ELEMENTARY: THE CURRICULAR DECISION-MAKING  
AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES OF BLACK MALE  
ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Ashlea Jean Campbell

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Teacher Education  
Educational Studies

August 2021

This Dissertation by: Ashlea Jean Campbell

Entitled: *It's Elementary: The Curricular Decision-making and Instructional Practices of Black Male Elementary Teachers*

Has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the School of Teacher Education, Program of Educational Studies.

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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Date of Dissertation Defense June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Accepted by the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

Campbell, Ashlea J. *It's Elementary: The Curricular Decision-making and Instructional Practices of Black Male Elementary Teachers*. Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2021.

This study explored the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of four Black male elementary teachers in a large suburban school district. In order to capture the intersection of their racial and gender identity with their educational practices, the researcher utilized educational connoisseurship and criticism, a methodology that examines the nuances that exist in the curricular and pedagogical choices of teachers. Critical race theory provided a framework for addressing the nuance that exists while also challenging dominant ideology regarding Black male elementary teachers. In addition to interviews and observations, this study provided space for participants to contribute directly to the data collection process using autophotography—a method that allows participants to photograph aspects of their lives. Findings from this study indicated that culturally inherited practices of advocacy and communal learning, as well as intentions of care, guided participants' curricular decision-making and instructional practices. Additionally, findings revealed the campus culture disrupted the intentions of these teachers. Lastly, teachers in this study addressed the void in the prescribed curriculum they received by restoring the curriculum with what they felt was vital to student learning. The results of this study could influence professional learning by providing an awareness of the culturally relevant practices that are often undervalued.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to my family. To my parents, Kenn & Barbara Woodard, who instilled a love of learning in me at a young age. Dad, you were my first Black male teacher, and I attribute my success in writing to you reading the stories I would write as an elementary student. Mom, one of

my favorite memories was the summer after first grade when my school adopted new textbooks, and you took us to the school to purchase sets of every grade level from the previous textbook adoption. I then used those books to “teach” Ryan Woodard at home. Thank you, little brother for being my first student, and putting up with playing school--I think it was still better than playing with Barbies. To my own children Joel and Lena Campbell, the love of learning is something I get to witness with you each day. To watch you learn and make sense of the world is something that inspires and excites me. I loved being on this learning journey parallel to you two. To my partner in life, the one who when the return to higher education began calling, he was the first to pick up the phone and hand it to me. Thank you, Murad Campbell. Thank you for telling me to go, and for the many ways you supported me throughout this journey. I dedicate this study to the Black men who show up for children each day; I am honored to share your stories.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Even in the moment where we have a failed social experiment, we must fight.

—Cornel West, Ph.D. (Queally, 2020).

Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. At the time of embarking on this research journey, those three individuals reached their final destination abruptly at the hands of someone other than kind Death steering the carriage. Those hands belonged to someone who did not look like them and did not value them. As protests and riots took center stage, so did the multiple failures, inequities, and the realization that “the system cannot reform itself” (Queally, 2020).

The systems of inequity from housing to policing and prisons are ubiquitous and certainly related to their deaths. All of these inequities impact people like Arbery, Taylor and Floyd—people who are Black—in different ways. The system I chose to examine is the system in which I live and work: the educational system. The failures of education, particularly for Black children, are multifaceted from access to quality curriculum, facilities, and discipline; we see how important all of these things are to creating an ideal ecology for learning. We lose Black people to the industrial prison complex, police brutality, and even to schooling failures (Love, 2016). As I reflect on that, I am taken back to 2016 when the nation watched a Black man, who worked to make school better for all students he encountered, was shot and killed by police: Philando Castile.

### **Mr. Phil's Story**

It may seem odd for me to select Castile as there have been more recent Black deaths. I focus on him because he was a Black male educator in an elementary school. Philando Castile began his career in the Saint Paul Public School District--the school district from which he graduated from high school-- in 2002 first as a nutrition services assistant at Chelsea Heights Elementary School and then at Arlington High School. In August 2014, he was promoted to nutrition services supervisor at J.J. Hill Montessori Magnet School (Chan, 2016). As I read about his death, I wondered how the school community made sense of his death. I wondered what impact he made on the campus and how he was regarded by his peers. Fortunately, a quick Google search pulled up stories of students, parents, and colleagues sharing the impact he had on them. "Parents, several of whom rallied for justice outside the tight-knit school Thursday, said they felt safe knowing Castile was in charge of their children's food and said Castile transformed the cafeteria into a positive and cheerful space" (Chan, 2016). Multiple stories highlighted how "Mr. Phil," knew each child's name, gave high-fives, and was a calming presence on campus. A memorial bench was donated to the campus in his memory, and a school lunch debt elimination fund clears lunch fees for students each year (Carson & Berhea, 2017; Chan, 2016). Although Castile was not an educator in the traditional sense, his story allowed me to consider not only the choices he made each day to show up and support young scholars, but the decisions other Black male elementary teachers make each day. Furthermore, I wanted to see if they are celebrated in life, as Castile is celebrated in death.

### **Problem of Practice**

Even with principals trying to create social-justice oriented, anti-racist, and multicultural schools, students of color still encounter staff who inflict harm onto students through acts of

outright racism and microaggressions (Laura, 2018). Black male educators have the ability to mitigate the negative effects of racism on children by serving as advocates (Bryan & Ford, 2014). Unfortunately, Black males make up only 2% of the public school teaching staff nationally (Strauss, 2015; Walker et al., 2019). Additionally, schools are uncomfortable and unwelcoming places of employment for Black men (Mitchell, 2016). This is largely due to Black men being overlooked for their pedagogy but utilized for their perceived disciplinarian abilities (Borowski & Will, 2021). Instead, school leaders should focus on Black male educators' ability to build a positive campus culture that includes restorative, validating, and affirming teaching practices (Henderson et al., 2019).

In addition to the problem of students of color not seeing staff who resemble themselves, there are many other problems. One such problem is White students lack of exposure to diverse role models. Another problem is that students do not regularly see male teachers, especially in elementary school. This speaks to larger problems with gender equity in education. Males face greater difficulty getting hired at the elementary level than at the secondary level (Wiest, 2003). White women are generally approached about teaching during elementary school, Black men are typically not approached about teaching until after they graduate college. (Borowski & Will, 2021). While society pushes for more equitable practices regarding increasing representation of girls and women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), the push for men to enter more female-dominated careers does not exist. Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (2003) highlights the contradiction in gender-equitable practices.

American education can be rightly proud of these attainments and aspirations. Still, we could do better in securing these goals and others by analyzing the aims that gave rise to them. Why, for example, have we decided to encourage young women to study math and

science? Well, because it's the fair thing to do! Equity seems to require it. If equity is the aim, however, why are we not concerned that so few young men become elementary school teachers, social workers, early childhood teachers, and full-time parents? The response to this is that equity refers to equitable financial opportunities, and the occupations traditionally available to women do not pay well. But are they important? Well, of course. Why not pay appropriately for them, then, and strive for a balanced form of equity? (p.89).

Male teachers cite low pay as a reason for not entering the teaching profession, especially at the elementary level as they can earn significant extra pay coaching at the secondary level, or serving as administrators (Wiest, 2003).

When one examines the issues of race and gender together, we get a glimpse of just how persistent racism and sexism is. While one might argue that men cannot be victims of sexism, the examples I described and what the literature will show is that the systems that keep men out of education professions were enacted to uphold the patriarchy in which women are expected to nurture and care for others without the reward of what some might consider high, but appropriate pay. Furthermore, when men do choose to enter the field, especially Black men, they are expected to be disciplinarians rather than caring teachers (Brown, 2012; Wiest, 2003). The lack of Black male teaching staff at the elementary level presents even more problems of practice with regard to curriculum and instruction.

Previous research shows that while teaching and learning is prioritized for teachers, for Black male teachers, policing and punishing Black students becomes the priority (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Brockenbaugh, 2015). Furthermore, stereotypes due to gender and race lead to Black males determining that a career in teaching is unfathomable (Maylor, 2018). As a result of



the emphasis on discipline, and the many Black male educators who do not make it into classrooms, there is a real need for Black male teachers especially at the elementary level. Maylor (2018) relies on the words of bell hooks to reinforce the need for Black male educators that emphasizes the assault on Black youth from an early age. Hooks states that Black boys “have been assaulted by the cultural genocide taking place in early childhood educational institutions where they are simply not taught” (Maylor, 2018, p. 113). The lack of instruction that Black boys receive is something that Black male teachers can mitigate, especially at the elementary level where “early years’ educators hold implicitly biased views about black boys” (p. 113). By not studying and sharing the pedagogy and curriculum decision-making choices of these teachers, we do not allow schooling environments to be transformed into places where culturally relevant learning occurs. Even more so than Black male educators being celebrated, they need to be valued and viewed as essential to the field of education.

### **Rationale for the Study**

In order to begin the discussion on Black male elementary educators and the work they do, a study like the one I conducted is important. The study did not simply look at what helps or hinders Black men teaching in the lower grades, but what steps they take to develop and select culturally relevant curricula, how they enact care, and how they mitigate bias. The study is unique because it not only looked at Black male educators' choices to enter education, but the curricular and instructional choices they made once they are in the classroom.

### **Significance of the Study**

To reiterate the words of Dr. Cornel West, we are living in a failed social experiment and we must fight. Part of that fight is resistance, and part of that resistance is education. In light of the recent murders of Arbery, Floyd, and Taylor, stakeholders have shifted their focus from high

stakes testing to providing more professional learning in the areas of culturally responsive pedagogy, restorative practices, and stemming the flow of the school to prison pipeline for Black, Indigenous, students of color (Sawchuck, 2021). As a social emotional learning specialist, my inbox is full of invitations to webinars related to those topics. However, we have a viable, reliable, and credible resource for this information: Black male educators. The teaching practices and curricular decision-making skills of Black men should be added to existing educational research. This study is significant because it is the first step in adding more voices to research.

### **Purpose**

This study explored the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of Black male elementary educators.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided this study:

- Q1     What are the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students?
- Q2     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?
- Q3     How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence Black male elementary school teachers curricular decision-making and instructional practices?

I will describe below how each question in this study informed the design and purpose of the study. One of the major factors in my consideration to conduct a study of this nature was its emphasis on curriculum. This study examines the intended and operational curriculum through interviews, observations, and a unique form of reflection called autophotography. To answer my research questions, I used Eisner's educational connoisseurship and criticism as the methodology in this study. Educational connoisseurship and criticism, or educational criticism, allowed me, as

the researcher, to highlight the experiences of the participants through description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics with a focus on Eisner's (1992) ecology of schooling—specifically pedagogical, curricular, and intentional.

Q1     What are the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students?

Throughout this study, I observed, interviewed and collected artifacts, which I then later analyzed to determine participants' intended and operational curricula. This question is significant because I wanted to understand the curricular and instructional intentions of Black male elementary teachers. This question serves as the foundation for the overall study. Moroye (2009) states that, "Intentions guide, among other things, curricular choices, emphases, and omissions" (p. 793). Considering those choices, emphases, and omissions helped me to understand not only the curriculum and instruction Black male teachers provide, but who they are as Black men and educators. Martin (2014) completed a study on double-consciousness of Black male educators. While this study addressed some of the instructional intentions of Black male educators, it did not specifically address their curricular decision-making. Thus, this study closely examined what Black male teachers intend for their students to learn and gain while in their classrooms.

Q2     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?

I cannot ignore the influence campus culture has on the intentions and practices of Black male elementary teachers. I hoped to understand what causes Black men to stay on elementary campuses, and what effect the environment might have on their decision to leave elementary campuses or teaching in general. Through this research, I came to understand the positive and negative attributes of campus culture and how it impacts the intentions and practices of the Black

men teaching on elementary campuses. This particular question addresses not only the structural dimension of schooling by looking at culture, but also addresses the nuances that accompany the interactions of diverse school staff.

**Q3** How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?

In order to understand how Black male elementary teachers perceive their race and gender to inform their instructional practices, I sought to understand experiences related to their identity. Therefore, while the previous question addressed Black male teachers' intentions for their students, this question considered how their race and gender influence those intentions. Previous research looks at the experiences of Black male educators in a broad sense, and much of the research on Black male teachers that does exist tends to focus on issues of race and not issues of gender (Henfield, et al., 2013; Martin, 2014). What makes this study unique is that it focused on the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of Black men.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

#### **Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism**

As an educator, I recognize how my perceptions about race and gender inform my intentions and behaviors for teaching and decision-making. I purposely chose educational connoisseurship and criticism as my methodology because my lived experiences as a Black, biracial woman differs greatly from the participants of this study. My perception of how Black men approach their teaching craft is rooted in my experiences (Eisner, 1998). Rather than shy away from those perceptions, I utilized educational criticism to bring my perceptions of the experiences of Black male elementary teachers to the forefront of my thinking. Even further, I utilized two major principles of race-focused criticism in this study by focusing my attention on

how race imperceptibly insinuates itself in the contexts in which it exists, and examining the congruency of the different curricula and their impact on diverse students, as well as the Black men teaching diverse students (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

I found myself with my biases, assumptions and knowledge, navigating two roles during the course of this study: one that required me to utilize connoisseurship and the other criticism. In these two roles, I relied on interviews, observations, artifact collection, and autophotography to enable others to notice what might otherwise be overlooked, as well as share those descriptions, themes, and judgements. While educational criticism is considered an arts-based research method, I included the additional arts-based data collection method of autophotography in order to allow for increased participant ownership in their role in the study through creation, reflection, and description (Yang, 2012). Furthermore, my aim for this study was to improve what I perceive to be a problem of practice regarding the lack of Black men teaching elementary students, as well as an understanding of the teaching practices and curricular decision-making of these men.

### **Participant Selection**

The participants in this study are four Black male elementary teachers within the public school district in which I work as a social emotional learning specialist. Lawrence is a kindergarten teacher in his second year of teaching at a diverse elementary school in Dallas, Texas. Lawrence is a 2019 college graduate, and besides working as a retail salesperson in college, teaching is his only career. Mike is a sixth grade Language Arts teacher at an elementary school in Dallas, Texas. Prior to joining his campus, he taught Language Arts and Social Studies at a middle school, and worked as a long-term sub while obtaining his teaching license. He worked as a juvenile probation officer and truck driver prior to becoming a teacher. Antonio, a

special education teacher who worked in the legal field before becoming a teacher, works down the hall from Mike. Antonio is a new teacher on campus having worked at various levels of schools in both charter and public districts. Finally, Wesley works as a student culture coach at an elementary campus also in Dallas, Texas. He is the only one teaching in the district he attended as a child and from which he graduated. Prior to becoming a teacher he worked in recruitment for a professional sports team. The school district's student body is ethnically diverse; however, the teaching staff is largely White and female. Interestingly, all participants work at schools led by Black principals. Three of them work for Black female principals, while one has a Black male principal.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The first step after completing the necessary consent forms was to meet with each participant individually to further explain the process and provide instruction on the autophotography process. During that time, I also conducted a semi-structured interview, which consisted of questions about the participants' experience as a Black male elementary student, experience as a Black male elementary teacher, instructional practices, and curricular decision-making processes. After that, I conducted four thirty-minute observations of each participant teaching a lesson. At the conclusion of the observation period, I interviewed each participant again using an unstructured interview process. During this session, participants had the opportunity to share their autophotography selections.

### **Data Analysis**

While several themes emerged immediately during the data collection process, I utilized various methods to analyze the data. One was not a formal process, but emerged almost organically. As I journaled my thoughts and impressions following each classroom visit, I

noticed conflicting and coordinating trends among the men's classroom presence. I used descriptive coding to analyze journal notes, observation notes, photographs, and interview transcripts. From those results, I developed interpretations of the collected data. I titled the codes with meaningful, artful names (Uhrmacher, et al., 2017). I envisioned myself as a critic and so instead of thinking of my analysis process as coding, I equated coding with annotating the data. Annotation allowed me to consider such nuances as voice, tone, imagery, and syntax—all characteristics of literary analysis and as I came to understand, important for race-focused criticism. This allowed me to see how all the parts of the data came together “as an interconnected whole (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p.57).

### **Key Terms**

In order for readers to understand fully not only the data collection process, as well as the conceptual framework and dimensions of schooling, I include key terms that present themselves throughout the study. Below is an overview of the key terms used throughout this study.

*Autophotography:* A research method which asks participants to take photographs of their environment for the purpose of using the works as data. This differs from photo elicitation, which uses photographs to generate discussion, not points of data (Glaw et al., 2017).

*Complementary Curriculum:* An addition to the curriculum solely from the teacher that may enhance or hinder the educational process (Moroye, 2009).

*Critical Race Theory:* A theoretical framework based on the following five components: “(a) intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of oppression/subordination; (b) challenge to dominant ideology; (c) commitment to social justice; (d) centrality of

experiential knowledge; and (e) transdisciplinary perspective” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 35)

*Educational Connoisseurship & Criticism:* Developed by Elliot Eisner, this qualitative evaluation model and research methodology “grounds on the professional expertise of the program evaluators while evaluating an institution, program, product or activity” (Yükse, 2010).

*Explicit Curriculum:* A curriculum that is overtly designed and implemented (Milner, 2017)

*Hidden Curriculum:* A curriculum characterized by institutional and societal norms and practices (Moroye, 2009).

*Intended Curriculum:* The formal curriculum taught by the teacher (Eisner, 2002).

*Null Curriculum:* Refers to what is not taught or excluded from the curriculum (Flinders et al., 1986)

*Operational Curriculum:* Refers to the actual curriculum that is delivered and presented by each teacher (Eisner, 2002).

### **Adjusting the Lens**

The findings of this study not only implicated ways to improve educational processes and environments, but also did so by drawing out the historical roots in Black men and their teaching practices and curricular decision-making. Givens (2021) characterizes these as inherited practices. These practices date back to when laws in the United States prevented Black people from gaining a formal education— a time when education was a survival tactic used to overcome oppression. The inherited practices that presented themselves in this study include advocacy and communal learning. All participants described a desire to provide what was missing from their



own elementary school experiences and build an inclusive classroom community—a desire reflected in the care the participants have for their students.

It is important to note that in spite of the fact that all participants work for Black principals, each participant identified ways in which the campus culture impeded their intentions for their students, their teaching, curricular decision-making. The ways campus culture impeded their work varied, as did the participant outcomes. For example, as a means of protection some participants excluded themselves from most of the school staff and only interacted when necessary. Others craved more community building among staff so that they could share their craft as well as learn from others. Participants also expressed that more needed to be done to make Black men feel comfortable teaching on an elementary campus. All findings indicate a need to adjust the lens through which society considers, appreciates, and values the instructional practices and curricular decision-making of Black male elementary teachers.

### **Researcher Statement**

Each day, I send my Black son to school, I wonder if his teachers will recognize and appreciate all of the beautiful ideas that my Joel (who is obsessed with magic, skateboarding, and basketball) has in his head. For the majority of his elementary school career, he had at least one Black male teacher---his music teacher. During his time in elementary school, I felt as though he had at least one person he could look to as a role model.

This year is the first year that I have two children in elementary school, and while they both attend school virtually due the COVID-19 pandemic, the teacher with whom they both have made a distinct connection is their Black male music teacher. This is my daughter's first year in an elementary school, and besides her kindergarten teacher's name, her music teacher is the only other person's name she knows. As for my son, he knows the name John Williams, not because

his teacher made them memorize the names of famous composers, but because his Black male music teacher saw his interest in Star Wars and shared YouTube videos of his music. Because of this act of care, my son Joel's taste in music expanded and now includes classical music among other musical genres. This teacher helped to connect Joel to a curriculum in which he previously had very little interest. This is not to say that similar instances could not happen with his White and female teachers; it is only to say that thus far those experiences have not occurred.

Outside of my own children, the elementary school environment is not one to which I have been privy. I embarked on my educational journey in 2000 as a first year undergraduate at the University of Kansas. It was there that I decided to pursue secondary English Language Arts as a career. I earned my master's degree in Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis in English education. From there I completed a student teaching experience at the middle level and an internship at a local high school. In 2005, I relocated to Dallas, Texas, and taught seventh grade Language Arts for seven years and developmental writing at a local community college for seven years. It was not until I began my work as a program specialist that I began to interact with elementary age students and their teachers. I saw glimpses of what Joel experienced with his music teacher. However, while school staff praised Black male teachers for the work they did and the kids genuinely cared for them, they did not stay in their positions long. Moreover, while it is positive that they were praised for their caring relationship with children, I rarely heard praise for their instructional practices or the difference their teaching made in the lives of their students. It seemed that they were not recognized for curriculum leadership as well.

This coincides with another belief that I hold true. The early pioneers of Black education—W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Carter G. Woodson—were and should be recognized as curricular theorists, or curricularists. I attribute the lack of representation of Black

males as teachers in schools is due not only to systems of white supremacy and gender inequity, but also to a lack of understanding concerning the contributions of Blacks to education postbellum. This viewpoint is largely based on one of the key components of critical race theory: challenging dominant ideology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These curricularists, and by proxy Black male educators in general, challenge dominant ideology regarding teaching and Black men as educators. Givens (2021) coined the term *fugitive pedagogy*. In the book jacket cover, Givens highlights the ways in which Black educators “developed covert instructional strategies, creative responses to the persistence of White opposition.” While society---influenced by White supremacy---does not outwardly oppose the practices of Black male teachers, the participants in this study shared the ways in which their pedagogy was interrupted and their intentions not realized.

As I approached this study, I brought my own assumptions and biases with me based on my own conceptual framework influenced by critical race theory. I believe that I do have a bias towards male educators, and by default Black male educators at the elementary level. This bias, or perhaps suspicion toward Black male educators, is not due to their effectiveness, but due to my lack of experience with them as a child and professionally due to their low representation. Part of my decision to conduct this study was to push myself outside of my comfort zone and confront this bias.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This chapter serves as an introduction and helps to build a case for the need for this study. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature on this topic including the history of Black education in the United States, Black male curriculum theorists, gendered norms and elementary education, and Black male educators. Furthermore, Chapter Two provides an explanation for the

theoretical framework. Chapter Three outlines the educational connoisseurship and criticism research design, including descriptions of the participants, methods of data collection, and analysis of the data. Chapter Four puts together the descriptions and interpretations of each participant through the use of vignettes. In addition to my interpretations and descriptions, each participant was able to provide their own descriptions and interpretations of themselves through autophotography, which allowed them to take photographs of things that represented them. To allow them to be more involved in this arts-based research process, participants captioned each photograph as well. Finally, in Chapter Five, I provide further interpretation, as well as, evaluation, and analysis of the findings. In this chapter, I present the themes which include not only intentions of care, but also advocacy and communal learning. Additionally, the findings indicate that campus culture hinders the participants' art of teaching. I share these findings not to offer hope as the teaching practices of these men have the ability to move curriculum and instruction to something that is truly culturally responsive.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

I begin this literature review by acknowledging my own educational experiences as a Black woman. These experiences, as well as my race and gender influence my biases, my admiration, and my curiosity towards Black male educators, specifically those working at the elementary school level. As I think back to my own educational journey, my paternal grandmother, Martha Burney Woodard Rawlins informally led my first introduction to teaching by a Black person. My grandmother's vast public service experience in Kansas could serve as a model for civics, history, and service learning. In addition to fighting to integrate public pools, she helped to establish People First, a transportation service for disabled residents. In 1987, she organized her town's first Martin Luther King celebration. I can vividly recall attending the event, and two weeks later seeing her and my step-grandfather on the local news discussing the vandalism done to their home ("Our Civil Rights Heroes: Martha Woodard Rawlins", 2019).

However, it was the informal lessons that stuck and live within me today. Those informal lessons about my Black and Seminole ancestors did not appear in the curriculum in my elementary school. I came to understand who I was through those lessons. Although my school painted a very whitewashed, dismissive, and painful image of my Black and Seminole families, my grandmother provided restoration and healing through those lessons.

At my elementary school, students with disabilities were kept in certain parts of the school, often away from "mainstream" students. This created a divide between those with and

without disabilities. From my grandmother, I learned that people with disabilities were people first. She served as an advocate for people with disabilities, and a guardian for a woman with an intellectual developmental disability. As much as my grandmother gave of her time to advocate, protect, and serve this community, she noted how much of a pupil she became in their “classrooms.”

My first experience with Black male educators occurred within my own home with my dad, who much like my grandmother, imparted information to us through storytelling, civic responsibility, and community service. I was in third grade when I encountered Mr. Grover Allen. Mr. Allen was the site coordinator for the after school program at my elementary school called Latchkey. He also served as the lunchroom attendant at the lower-grades (K-2) campus.

Mr. Allen was quite eccentric and unconventional in his teaching methods, but his instructional practices resonate with me today. Mr. Allen made sure that every child in Latchkey had an activity in which they could thrive. For example, each day after school, we had outdoors time if the weather permitted. Often, Mr. Allen would organize us into large groups to play games like Red Rover or Kickball--games I hated. His only request was that we try for a bit before retreating to the playground. Additionally, on snowy or rainy days, we played board games. There were some that I mastered, but I lost games like Guess Who and Uno. Again, Mr. Allen provided us with an alternate curriculum that still fostered social and emotional growth by allowing some of us to create fashion shows and dance competitions. I can recall one day getting my favorite accessory, but feeling scared to waltz across the makeshift runway. Mr. Allen told me to look past the audience and hold my head high. Even though I had trouble holding my head high, Mr. Allen gave me the confidence to actually step on the runway and conquer my fears.

When I entered fifth grade my parents no longer required that my younger brother and I attend Latchkey. Instead, we walked or rode our bicycles home. I never thanked him for his contribution to my life. At the time, words like curriculum and instruction did not exist in my vocabulary. However, if I had the chance to see him now, I might ask how he went about developing his social and emotional learning curriculum, and how he went about instructing us in the manner in which he did. I might ask him how his race and gender influenced the decisions he made during our after school program. Since I cannot ask him, this study allowed me to focus on four Black men today who are shaping the lives of elementary students in meaningful ways, and to amend some of the misrepresentations of Black men who teach elementary students.

### **Review of Literature**

This review of the literature outlines the experiences of Black male elementary level educators, specifically their curricular decision-making and instructional practices. This review rests on the notion that Black educators in general have “a tradition of intellectual and sociopolitical service to the black community” which dates back to the Reconstruction Era (Pabon, 2016, p. 4). Additionally, this review provides historical theories of Black curriculum and instruction from notable Black male teachers. The work of prominent Black men during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement provides a lens for me to explore how the social milieu affected those educators’ intentions for their students. This allows for a juxtaposition with how current societal issues influence the curricular choices and teaching practices of the Black male teachers of today.

The most important portion of this review moves from Black curriculum theorists, who are overwhelmingly male, to the experiences of Black male educators who are minorities among their colleagues. It examines the contrasting, multiple representations of Black male teachers as

educational visionaries, leaders, curriculum developers, agents of change, the problem, and the solution. Simultaneously, it exposes the lack of research regarding Black male elementary school teachers and establish a need for inquiry. The final part of the chapter outlines critical race theory (CRT), specifically a pragmatic historicist approach to race criticism, as a theoretical framework for this study (Glaude, 2007; Uhrmacher, et al., 2017).

### **History of Black Education in the United States**

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom (McComb, 2006).

Abraham Lincoln's 1863 proclamation, which effectively ended slavery, should have been the beginning of freedom for Black Americans. Instead, Whites, who were and remain the majority in the United States, enacted systems that continue to oppress Blacks. One of those systems was the judicial system that denied Blacks citizenship and constitutional rights because of the 1857 Dred Scott decision (Spring, 2013). However, the 14th amendment (1866) declared equal protection under the law. This extended to not only to education, but the interpretation of this led to schooling being an oppressive force (Spring, 2013).

Despite this, Blacks experienced an increase in literacy rates going from a 7% rate in 1863 to 90% over the next ninety years. And by 1900, there was a 25% increase in the number of Blacks attending school (Spring, 2013). These numbers show the ability and determination of



Blacks, many of whom were former slaves, to rise up and become educated individuals.

However, there were differing approaches to educating African Americans. Much of the conflict centered on theories of Black academic curriculum. W.E.B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, two well-respected philosophers of education, wanted to see Black people prosper, but Du Bois felt as though a liberal arts curriculum better served them, while Washington promoted vocational education. Similarly, Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black history month, promoted an Afrocentric curriculum.

Of the six different curriculum orientations William H. Watkins describes in his article “Black Curriculum Orientations: A Preliminary Inquiry,” the Black liberal education not only resonates with John Dewey’s ideas regarding education, but also Du Bois and Woodson. The curriculum held a clear connection to Deweyan themes, as “it was designed to develop the students’ analytical and critical faculties, and to help students become worldly, tolerant, and capable of societal participation” (Watkins, 1993, p. 328). This coincides with Woodson’s desire to create more enlightened thinkers by challenging preconceived notions of African Americans, and highlighting the contributions of the people of Africa to the world. He not only sought to make Blacks capable of participating in society, but to make them invaluable to society, as they possess “tremendous creativity and resilience” (Levine, 2000, p. 6). Furthermore, Du Bois possessed the belief that “Black America would be saved by its ‘exceptional men’” (Watkins, 1993, p. 329).

While both liberal arts and vocational education provided African Americans with a means to secure social and financial capital, some argued for an education that recognized the contributions of persons of African descent to not only the United States, but the world (Binder, 2011). This idea gained traction in the late twentieth century, but originated postbellum with

Woodson and to a lesser extent Du Bois. While Woodson and Du Bois may not have specifically outlined what components an Afrocentric curriculum would include, Woodson did highlight the need and the function of the curriculum, or what Eisner describes as the intended curriculum (Eisner, 1998).

In the teaching of fine arts these instructors usually started with Greece by showing how that art was influenced from without, but they omitted the African influence which scientists now regard as significant and dominant in early Hellas. They failed to teach the student the Mediterranean Melting Pot with the Negroes from Africa bringing their wares, their ideas and their blood therein to influence the history of Greece, Carthage, and Rome. Making desire father to the thought, our teachers either ignored these influences or to belittle them by working out theories to the contrary (Woodson, 1933, p. 11).

Woodson illustrates the null curriculum, which “refers to what the students do not have the opportunity to learn” (Milner, 2017, p.88). In this case, the null curriculum includes accurate representation of the talents and contributions of Black people. Woodson’s desire is to move from the null curriculum to the explicit curriculum, a curriculum that is overtly designed and implemented (Milner, 2017). This coincides with the work of Asa Hilliard who points out the areas in which curricula fall short of addressing Afrocentric themes. Watkins (1993) outlines this:

- The significant history of Africans before the slave trade is ignored.
- A history of peoples of Africa is most often ignored.
- A history of the people of the African diaspora -- for example, Fiji, the Philippines, and Dravidian India -- is not taught.

- Cultural differences, as opposed to similarities of Africans in the diaspora, are highlighted.
- Little of the struggle against slavery, colonialism, segregation, apartheid, and domination is taught.
- Little explanation of common origins and elements in the systems of oppression during the last four hundred years is offered (p.331).

The challenge of removing Afrocentric curricula from its place in the null, continues today. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) approved an African American Studies course for the 2019-20 school year. The course counts as 1.0 elective credit for students in grades 9-12. While the course does not count for a History or Social Studies credit, the credentialing requirements of course instructors is “Certified Secondary Social Studies, including Composite and History” (Texas Education Agency, 2019). This inclusion of the African American Studies course appears to be progress, but the lack of recognition of the course as one that contends with Eurocentric U.S. History, Humanities, and World History courses which all count for credit towards graduation, reveals even more of a problem. Binder (2011) addresses this problem, and the demands some parents and community members fought for in the late 1980’s when seeking a more Afrocentric focus in predominantly Black schools.

In a similar tone, Afrocentrists claimed that they did not seek to replace a Eurocentric curriculum with an Afrocentric one, for that would only repeat the miseducation of students and continue an arrogant disregard for other cultures. Rather, national figures in the movement proposed to correct the misrepresentation of Africa in world history by adding previously slighted materials about the continent and its people and by ridding the school system of only the materials that are biased and white-centered (Binder, 2011, p.581).

The struggles to rid schools of biased and white-centered materials continues today. Oppression and racism continue to flourish in school systems. Because of this, it is worth noting the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of three Black male educators who in the face of similar oppression and racism shaped schooling for American descendants of slaves in the beginning by moving from informal education to formal education.

The shift from informal education to formal education is significant because it shows how Black autonomy over their own education was completely eradicated. With that came a curriculum they did not design. While Blacks had to hide their informal teaching practices during slavery, once allowed to teach and learn, they still faced oppression when trying to enact a formal curriculum (Givens, 2021).

### ***Black Male Curriculum Theorists***

Because this study addresses teaching practices and curriculum, it is important to note that while not unique to Black male educators, educators of students of color have to seek out culturally relevant models of teaching and curriculum. Part of this problem is that there is very little in the area of the contributions of African Americans to the field of education (Pabon, 2016). Although some have been acknowledged for their contributions to education, like Du Bois, they are not often included as curricularists. I use the terms curricularist and curriculum theorist interchangeably, and use it over other terms like education scholar because, for me, curriculum theorists focus almost exclusively on curriculum. They examine what Eisner (1998) calls the curricular dimension and even the pedagogical dimension. While school structures are important to them, they focus on what is taught and how it is taught. To address this gap, this section examines the works of the few prominent names of Black male educators whom I will make the argument are Black curricularists. Although Black women, such as Mary McLeod

Bethune were influential in Black education, I choose to focus on the Black men in order to align their efforts with that of the participants in my study. These men thrived at educating their own. One of whom is renowned for invigorating the souls of black folk.

**W.E.B Du Bois.** Du Bois is one of the first to write about the double-consciousness of Blacks, and the state of anti-Black racism at the beginning of the 20th century. What makes Du Bois unique in his approach to education, is the way in which he utilized different methods of research and expression. To share the experiences of Black people with others he utilized both the arts and sciences.

W.E.B. Du Bois was the quintessential boundary-crosser. More than any other social scientist I can think of, in his work and in his life, Du Bois captured the interdisciplinary as he moved from social philosophy to empirical sociology to autobiography to political essays to poetry and literature to social activism. He invented a new way of being, a point of view, a style of work that quite naturally, dynamically, organically integrated science, art, history and activism (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.7).

His most revered work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, displays his unique methodology. He begins almost each chapter with verses from Negro spirituals. This not only incorporates the arts, but also shows how educating Black folks in the arts allows them to impart their gifts unto America.

“In his view, the songs are part of the gift of the Negro people to American culture. The gift is not simply the singing of the songs, but the message and the expression of human experience they express. This gift of the American Negro, for Du Bois, constitutes the first genuinely aesthetic mark of American culture” (Anderson, 2007 p.55). Du Bois argued that this was possible if students were taught self-examination and reflection. He argued that youth

needed to learn about themselves in order to learn about others. He argues that former enslaved Blacks need time “for reflection and self-examination,” and that it would change “the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,--darkly as through a veil, and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission” (Du Bois, 1903/2013, p. 9).

The principle of self-respect is one Du Bois revisits throughout his work, and it is one point of criticism he holds for Booker T. Washington. Chapter three of *The Souls of Black Folk* highlights his admiration for and criticism of Washington largely based on his perception of lack of self-respect. He notes that Washington urges Black people to give up political power and civil rights in exchange for economic advancement. He argues that Washington allowed for “civil inferiority” instead of equality or equity. “He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run” (p. 33). Washington remains one of the most influential Black educators to date.

**Booker T. Washington.** Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois may not have approached the education of Black people in the same way, but their intentions were similar. They both wanted to see Black people prosper. Washington’s most notable contribution to the field of education still exists today: the Tuskegee Normal School, now the Tuskegee Institute. The curriculum of this school focused on self-reliance through training and vocation. Washington was aware of the White majority’s opposition to formal education for Blacks, so his school focused on training and providing vocational skills to students.

Booker T. Washington's philosophy allowed him to accept this where other black leaders, notably W.E.B. Du Bois, who had been Harvard educated, wanted what they believed to be the whole loaf of a liberal, university-oriented education. Vocational education was seen by Du Bois and others as a curriculum geared to returning blacks to servitude. But for Washington, vocational education was a veritable Trojan horse that could in plain view of the Southern authorities deliver not just its advertised instrumental ends but also significant liberal ones as well. If this was a form of education that the otherwise hostile South was willing to allow blacks, Washington could see that this could be a way to subvert the system (Lewis, 2014, p. 193).

This practical approach to education largely resembles Dewey's progressive ideas, but Washington's philosophy of education was largely influenced by European educational philosophers like Pestalozzi and Rousseau. "Ideas such as learning by doing, curriculum reflecting community life, cooperativeness, rejection of rote learning, interaction with nature, and a focus on problem solving and experimentation, mainstays of the advocacy of these great philosophers, were to be seen in the advocacy of both men" (p. 193). Furthermore, Washington's curriculum theory was seen as progressive, one that could pivot with changing economic and social shifts.

In addition, his vision of the curriculum stressed the importance of emerging situations. By fostering the power of independent thought, the students were free to employ the method of intelligence for problems that were of an immediate concern and problems that were social in nature. While a romantic interpretation of this approach might suggest that the curriculum was *laissez faire*, the evidence will show that the curriculum had boundaries that were structured to foster experimental inquiry in the context of a unified

curriculum that integrated the manual and the mental (Generals, 2000, p. 218).

Washington's pragmatic approach to curriculum and instruction, while critiqued, was also praised. Carter G. Woodson noted Washington's greatness by praising his oration skills in expressing what he perceived to be the needs of Black people (Woodson, 1947).

**Carter G. Woodson.** Carter G. Woodson shared similarities with Du Bois and Washington. Like Du Bois, he earned a doctorate from Harvard University (Du Bois was the first to earn the degree from Harvard and Woodson was the second). Both Du Bois and Woodson promoted a curriculum that included self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-respect.

Like Washington, Woodson promoted vocational education too:

For example, a year or two after the author left Harvard he found out West a schoolmate who was studying wool. "How did you happen to go into this sort of thing?" the author inquired. His people, the former replied, had had some experience in wool, and in college he prepared for this work. On the contrary, the author studied Aristotle, Plato, Marsiglio of Padua, and Pascasius Rathbertus when he was in college. His friend who studied wool, however is now independently rich and has sufficient leisure to enjoy the cultural side of life which his knowledge of the science underlying his business developed, but the author has to make his living by begging for a struggling cause (Woodson, 1933, p. 19).

While Woodson did not think Whites were inferior (in fact, he felt Whites and Blacks could work well together if relationships were based on mutual cooperation and respect), he recognized that many Blacks, including himself, tried to obtain success through systems that benefited Whites only. He noted that Blacks possessed the ingenuity and talent to be successful with the tools they were given, and that they could define success for themselves independent of



White society's definition. Woodson sought to create institutions, similar to Tuskegee in that it would allow Blacks to be self-reliant in the face of white supremacy that attempted to stop them.

Despite these critiques of Washington, Woodson found his vision compelling, especially his interest in creating black institutions and taking a pragmatic approach to navigating a society overdetermined by white supremacy. While sympathetic to Washington, Woodson would be far less accommodating of white benefactors and political allies. He would commit his life to creating and sustaining black institutions while maintaining a consistent suspicion of white paternalism (Givens, 2021, p. 47).

Woodson theorized that Blacks did not see the ingenuity and talent they possessed due to being mis-educated. Woodson's most celebrated work, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, projects his theory. Woodson notes how even science, particularly biology, was distorted in order to instill inferiority in Blacks.

Medical school Negroes were likewise convinced of their inferiority in being reminded of their role as germ carriers. The prevalence of syphilis and tuberculosis among Negroes was especially emphasized without showing that these maladies are more deadly among the Negroes for the reason that they are Caucasian diseases; and since these plagues are new to Negroes, these sufferers have not had time to develop against them the immunity which time has permitted in the Caucasian (Woodson, 1933, p.13).

Likewise, Woodson notes mis-educative formal curriculum in which "the Negro had no place in this curricula. He was pictured as a human being of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and therefore useful only when made the hewer of wood and the drawer of water for others" (p.11). By leaving Black people out of the curriculum, and when included

emphasizing inferiority, Blacks continued to fall behind as they attempted to learn from a curriculum to which they could not connect.

I include these three pioneers in education not only to highlight the curricular theorizing of three Black male educators, but also to note the differences between the three. I expect to find differences in the approaches among the participants in my study. This is expected, as Black people, even Black male educators, are not monolithic. There is very little in the literature that addresses how those three educators approached their work with young learners. Du Bois, Washington, and Woodson did not explicitly outline in their work their thoughts on teaching elementary students.

**Civil Rights Movement and Black Male Educators.** The teaching practices of Black males during Reconstruction provides a foundation for the work those Black male educators conducted during the civil rights movement. The movement is often characterized as a time of activism, especially in regards to demanding improved facilities, bus transportation, and appropriate teacher salaries (Loder-Jackson, 2011). Despite this focus on environmental and logistical considerations for schooling, Black educators also focused on a pedagogy of activism. Sadly enough, researchers have spent little effort in investigating this pedagogy and how to replicate it for modern concerns. “Even with respect to delivering pedagogy that challenges the status quo, African American educators have been said to have lost their edge since the civil rights movement” (Loder-Jackson, 2011, p.154). Similarly, “there has been no investigation of these educators’ perspectives on the schooling of Black children retrospectively or today” (p.155).

The teaching practices of civil rights era Black educators is one that is difficult to examine. Unlike Du Bois, Washington, and Woodson, there were not notable theorists or

education scholars recognized during that time. The political and social turmoil during that time, left little time to theorize about pedagogy, and the number of living Black educators of that time period is dwindling.

Their teachers who are still with us are fewer in number, in their eighties, nineties, and in some cases a hundred years or older. In the time period covered by my study, young people and their teachers were in the midst of the most profound social movement of the twentieth century. The ideals of freedom and liberation were integral to the social milieu of the time. These ideals were not disconnected from the pedagogy and learning taking place in schools, but were instead a central part of this education (Aldridge, 2020, p. 23). Similarly, narrative inquiry and oral history serve well in collecting this often unreachable data. For example in talking to teachers during that era about their role in the movement, some cited resistance as a form of education. This meant ignoring the number of absent students who went to protest, or providing a lesson on voting rights so that students could disseminate the information to their families (Loder-Jackson, 2020).

Aldridge's qualitative study on teachers during the Civil Rights Movement did include one Black male educator who states that "being an educator involved more than the practical task of teaching classes; it also entailed a knowledge of psychology, along with history and the social sciences" (p.20). The educator, James E. Wright, taught high school social studies and often employed a teaching method that allowed for the open discussion of topics raised by students. Wright did not stop there as he wanted his students to be well-informed and required them to learn about and argue positions that differed with their own. However, Aldridge's examples and much of the others mentioned in this era and Reconstruction focus on secondary and post-secondary education. Very few studies explore the intentions of Black educators for their

elementary school age students. This next section will address gender and elementary school teaching.

### **Gendered Norms and Elementary Education**

“Lee: ‘It is in the kids' interest ... to have male teachers.... If you want a society that is not sexist . . . then [school] is a one of the places where we have to . . . [make] changes’” (Coulter & McNay, 1993).

The present study seeks to fill a gap in the research regarding the experiences of Black male educators (BMEs) in elementary schools. “Dewey strongly suggests that we should not be surprised by the emotional colouring of experiences such as my gender experience in elementary schools, but, rather, should engage and expose our gender and other biases so that self-reflection and further growth may occur” (Bradley, 2000, p.157). In order to reflect on my own biases and expose the bias that exists in schooling, I have to examine gender separate from race, as there are few studies that solely focus on the experiences of BMEs at the elementary level. In this section, I identify current research regarding the experiences of male teachers in elementary schools with particular attention given to their curricular and instructional decision-making practices. I also identify the perceptions of male elementary teachers and how they intersect with gendered norms about teaching young children.

#### ***Male Teachers in the Lower Grades***

My lack of experience with elementary Black male educators, as well as the significant experience I had with Mr. Allen, led me to this study. I wondered what led males, specifically Black males, to want to teach elementary school. My own interaction with Black male educators was few and far between. In addition to Mr. Allen, I had one friend who pursued a degree in elementary education, and taught third grade for a few years before entering into commercial real

estate. At my daughter's public primary school (two levels of early learning and until recently, kindergarten), there were male teaching assistants, some Black, who were in the process of obtaining their elementary teaching certifications. I did not have a chance to engage with them and find out what drew them to elementary school teaching.

This section of the review examines the research on all men in elementary education and then focuses on Black men in the lower grades. The reason for this is to provide a contrast between the two groups, and to draw out the unique experiences of Black male elementary teachers. The need for "more men in elementary" has arisen sporadically in Canada and the United States since the 1950s, (Coulter & McNay, 1993, p.399). In 1997, the National Education Association (NEA) reported that males account for 9.1% of the total elementary teaching cohort. NEA also stated that percentages of males in elementary schools have declined steadily since 1981 from 17.7% to 9.1% in 1996 (Bradley, 2000). Similarly, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2020) reports that during the 1999-2000 school year, males accounted for 12% of the elementary teaching population. During the 2017-18 school year, the numbers slightly decreased to 11%. This is in sharp contrast with male teachers in secondary schools which included 41% for the 1999-2000 school year and 36% during the 2017-18 school year. Despite the low numbers, some males continue to choose the elementary school.

Overwhelmingly, male elementary teachers have altruistic reasons for entering the profession. Recent studies show the common theme of wanting to make a difference (Coulter & McNay, 1993; Bradley, 2000; Wiest, 2003; Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). However, making a difference looks different for each male teacher. Some cite their own positive elementary school experiences as a reason for entering the profession, while others mentioned wanting to give back and be a mentor and father figure to fatherless children. This calling to build relationships with

students and have a positive impact on their lives coincides with Noddings' theory of care.

"Noddings observed that viewing care in a relational way, rather than as a feminine attribute of a carer, leaves room for both males and females to be caring" (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005, p. 130). The idea that men can be carers is important because it challenges the notion that they should not be in elementary schools teaching young children.

Others noted the relative ease in obtaining a job at an elementary school due to their gender making them more marketable (Bradley, 2000). Furthermore, "some teachers believe the elementary setting allows them to explore new pedagogy and teach more holistically" (Wiest, 2003, p.64). The experiences of male elementary educators challenge traditional notions of who can care for and provide instruction for students. Further investigation into how they make decisions regarding curriculum and instruction helps to provide a complete picture of them.

**Curricular and Instructional Decision Making.** Planning for instruction, including pacing and student engagement prove to be challenging for male teacher candidates. In a mixed methods study by Stewart et al. (2016) that examined the experiences and outcomes of male pre-service teachers in comparison with their female peers showed that male teacher candidates scored lower than their female peers in the areas of assessing for student engagement, pacing, and assessment planning. Male teacher candidates scored higher in one content area: the arts. "At the first level, observable differences in mean scores that favored females occurred in every single subject area except arts." (Stewart et al., 2016, p.8). This seems to delineate from the perception that I held of male educators as being more interested in teaching and mentoring in order to obtain an athletic coaching position. This is what I attributed as the reason why more men joined the secondary teaching field rather than elementary. However, Stewart et al., (2016) also demonstrated the importance of pre-service teachers receiving explicit instruction on how to

plan engaging lessons that are paced well and allow for authentic assessment. The qualitative aspect of this study provided the thoughts of the master teachers assigned to the male candidates. Their beliefs about the pre-service teachers they guided shows that a more caring approach with male teacher candidates may be necessary.

He doesn't seem to understand his role in the classroom (Mrs. K. Master Teacher).

He needs to be more involved in the function of the classroom. I have given him simple tasks to keep students on task or to circulate around the room and answer questions as I work with a small group. He is unable to follow my directions (Mrs. K. Master Teacher) (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 12).

Both of the quotes from Mrs. K. show that she focuses on the problem rather than finding ways to help the pre-service teacher understand his role or provide more explicit examples of how his role looks within the classroom. If male teachers do not have a good pre-service teaching experience, they may not understand how to put the theory they learned into practice. Without the necessary guidance and support to do so, it makes it difficult to move into a successful teaching career.

### ***Perceptions of Male Elementary Teachers***

Mrs. K's responses in the Steward et al. (2016) study hint at the perceptions of female teachers toward male elementary teachers. For example Mrs. K categorized the tasks she gave the male candidate as "simple," but did not elaborate as to why they were simple. Her comments also show what she thinks the male teacher candidate should be able to do, but not any of the ways that she helped him to do them. Her comments almost suggest defiance.

In addition to defiance, the theme of suspicion often arises when discussing male elementary teachers. Perceptions of male educators at the elementary level vary, but all include

an underlying theme of suspicion (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005; Wiest, 2003; Stewart et al., 2016). Those suspicions can be as harmless as thinking one is going to exit teaching for a campus or district administrator position, to harmful by inferring that an adult male who prefers to work with elementary age children is a pedophile (Wiest, 2003). While it is easy to paint these assumptions as individualistic and possibly only reserved for a few, the perceptions impact the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of male teachers, and directly contribute to the sexism that exists in schools (Wiest, 2003).

Hansen & Mulholland (2005) note how society's perceptions of masculinity--often characterized by competition, dominance, power, and violence--are at odds with the perceptions of teachers. They explain that teachers are characterized as carers which is at odds with our society's perceptions of masculinity. This is where the suspicion creeps in, as it is the perceptions that drive the suspicion.

The suspicion affects male educators in different ways. For one, male educators are sexualized and viewed as predators (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). If a male teacher is seen giving a student a hug, it is "seen by others as performing atypical gender-identified behavior for men [who] are marginalized and treated with suspicion" (p.121). Research trends show that this not only affects how they choose to show care for their students, but also imposes on their curricular and extracurricular activities and decision-making (Wiest, 2003).

While these perceptions for male educators at the elementary level are generalized for all races, the perceptions differ for Black male educators and magnified at the elementary level (Bristol, 2015; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). These same perceptions exist, but even more perceptions and biases exist solely due to being members of the Black race. Additionally, the double consciousness Du Bois describes comes into play as male educators are aware of how



others perceive their race and how it impacts their teaching and interactions in the classroom. “Double consciousness for these reasons is presented as a sociological concept that has a wider normative quality, one that captures the dual character of unrecognised minority subjectivities and their transformative potential, alongside the conditions of impaired civic status that are allocated to minorities” (Meer, 2019, p. 51). In 1903, Du Bois expanded on this double consciousness through the use of the metaphor of the veil. “...the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.” And “One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 1903/2013, p. 51). Black male teachers are aware of the problems with the American school systems, and also how they are perceived in society.

### **Black Male Educators: Problem or Solution**

Surprisingly, much of the research that does exist on BMEs tends to focus on issues of race and not issues of gender (Henfield, et al., 2013; Martin, 2014). In fact the common themes mentioned include isolation, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding due to race. This double consciousness of being aware of one’s own race, as well as how others perceive one’s race looks different in a professional setting than in a social setting. In the school setting, Black male educators discuss wanting to navigate the system for their own self-preservation, but also to help their students, specifically their Black male students. Martin (2014) provides the voice of one participant who felt as though it was his duty not to wear a mask, but to be his authentic self.

He accepted the constraints of being Black in a predominantly White setting, nonetheless holds fast core values he associates with his authentic self. He later raised an interesting point when he stated, ‘I have not sold my soul to the system...I tell my students play the system

otherwise the system is going to play you.’ His commitment to maximizing what he gains from this system was a consistent theme throughout his interview (Martin, 2014, p. 102).

This system not only allows the participant to preserve one’s sanity, but also helps students navigate systems of oppression. From reading the interview, I become aware of a paternal sense of duty that the participant may or may not be aware that he possessed. This coincides with Bryan and Ford’s (2014) study on the recruitment and retention of BMEs for gifted education programs. Their study highlights the role BMEs play in the lives of Black male students. “The Black male teachers in gifted education have the power to interrupt such negative trends by serving as advocates for Black gifted male students” (p. 159). Additionally, no matter how many Black male educators feel as though a large part of their role is to serve as a mentor or father figure to male students of color particularly because they feel as though their non-Black male colleagues do not attend to boys of color nonacademic challenges (Bristol, 2015). When examining that issue, one can see how feelings of isolation, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding may not just be “feelings,” but occur due to systems in place.

Misunderstanding and misrepresentation tend to plague the African American community, including the stereotype of the Black male as absentee father. Research shows that Black males can have a significant impact on the lives of at-risk Black youth. However, earlier studies point to those men being part of the problem. In as early as the 1930’s, sociological research pointed to the Black male as being an absent father (Brown, 2012). The “Black males as absent fathers” narrative continued well into the 1990’s. However, a shift occurred during this time in which leaders began to position Black male educators as part of the solution. Universities, foundations, teacher education programs, and even celebrities began to invest in preparing the Black male for the education profession (Brown, 2012). One might look at pushing

Black males toward education as a good thing, but one has to look deeper at the push. The assumption made by others was not only that BMEs can support at-risk students, but that “Black male teachers are expected to be physically intimidating and capable of using their physical presence as a way to govern Black boys” (p. 308). Not only does this lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding, but it can also lead to isolation, especially as Black male educators lift the veil of consciousness and see that their role as described above aligns with the perceptions society holds of them. The experiences of BMEs continue to evolve as the teaching field evolves, as the profile of schools and students evolve, and as society’s view of Black men evolves.

### ***Black Male Educators’ Curricular and Instructional Decision-Making***

One reason Black males enter the teaching profession is to transform the educational environment for students, and this is done through teaching for social change (Hayes et al., 2014). Despite their view of education, even when provided with or developing their own culturally relevant teaching practices, Black male educators often succumb to pressure to abandon what they know works in favor of standardized curricula and pedagogy (Pabon, 2016). This abandonment of culturally relevant pedagogy deserves further examination into what characterizes culturally relevant pedagogy and why do Black male educators seek to implement it, but also pressure to abandon it. Participants in Pabon’s (2016) revealed that they had little control over what they taught.

Jamel described how he had little decision-making power over what he could teach. Furthermore, he suggested that this material was not helping his students learn. He recalled his own learning experiences as a student in school and drew parallels between his educational experiences and his students’. He realized that he had been miseducated—that is, his teachers taught irrelevant

material that was decontextualized and without rationale (Pabon, 2016, p. 17).

Similarly, Black male educators must abandon their caring, advocate-focused roles in favor of more authoritarian roles. (Hayes et al., 2014). Pabon (2016) highlights how when Black male teachers express discontent or a desire to change a schooling process, they are subsequently *schooled out*.

Once they entered the classroom, I am arguing that a *schooling out* process continued as the participants felt pressured to change their teaching practices and material in lieu of standardized curricula and pedagogies. In summary, these men were at the center of a paradox: They were encouraged to enter the teaching force based primarily on essentialist notions of their racial and gendered identity but were systematically pushed out of the classroom as they began to express dissatisfaction with the standardized curriculum they were being pressured to teach (Pabon, 2016, p. 20).

The schooling out process is one that has dire effects on the recruitment and retention of Black male elementary teachers. If they cannot contribute meaningfully to the school systems in which they work, and then they are likely to leave the profession (Pabon, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

The theoretical framework of a study is important because it provide a foundation from which to build a study. “The purpose of a theoretical framework is to demonstrate the interaction and relationship among a set of concepts, which, as a whole, describe a more complicated phenomenon” (Heale & Noble, 2019). In this study, the characteristics of the chosen framework of critical race theory, provided a way for me to examine the questions I posed in regards to

Black male elementary teachers' instructional practices and curricular decision-making, whilst also challenging dominant ideology.

Critical race theory seeks to center race and racism in the research process, as well as provide a response to oppression, and focus on individuals of color's experience in relation to gender, race, and class (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In addition, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identify five key elements to CRT as a methodology. These five key elements include “(a) intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of oppression/subordination; (b) challenge to dominant ideology; (c) commitment to social justice; (d) centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) transdisciplinary perspective” (p. 35). This theory informed my research as I not only examined the participants' experiences, but also how power dynamics come into play (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Challenging the dominant ideology is important to this study in terms of race and gender. Critical Race Theory allowed me to place race at the center of my inquiry, which allowed me to challenge the master narrative on Blacks that is “engulfed in deficit theories” (McGee & Stovall, 2015). The CRT framework allowed for the exploration of the experiences of Black male elementary teachers and how those experiences along with their race and gender identity influence their curricular decision-making and pedagogy. CRT allowed me to draw the connections from the inherited practices of the past and how they present in Black men's teaching today (Givens, 2021). Since storytelling is at the heart of CRT, participants shared their stories in semi-structured interviews and through artistic expression (Hayes et al., 2014). The aspects of CRT that emphasize storytelling in order to counter dominant ideology allowed me to see that the ways these teachers mediated the prescribed curriculum allowed them to address the needs of their diverse students and create a *restored curriculum*—which I will describe in detail.

These explorations were only possible with CRT as a framework because it recognizes race and racism as social constructs that are permanent fixtures of society, but sees them as separate entities; however, it contests color-blind racism which can best be described as those with privilege who choose not to acknowledge the experiences of people of color as being different and affected by race and racism (Brown, 2011; McGee & Stovall, 2015). The presence of color-blind racism is one that CRT challenges, but is only possible with examining historical events and movements in education (Brown, 2011; Chapman, 2007). This study rests on the work of former Black male educators as curricularists. Their work not only serves as a foundation for the study, but also as lenses through which to view the experiences of current Black male educators who are not seen as curricularists, and may not see themselves as such. I chose to include Du Bois, Washington, and Woodson in order to challenge ahistoricism—the lack of regard for historical events—which can uphold colorblind racism and white supremacy, as well as, gender inequity. Gender inequity addressed in this study presented itself differently than it might for studies that do not examine race. Critical race theory allowed me to see that the exclusion and isolation participants felt from their campus that appeared to be tied to their gender, was also tied to their race; their race and gender always intersected.

Critical race theory also provided me with a way to combine the history of Black education, specifically Black curricular history with the contemporary ways in which Black male teachers today think about and develop curriculum. This

### ***Pragmatic Race Criticism***

In this study which focuses not only on Black male identity, but also instructional practices and decision-making on curriculum, a historicist pragmatic approach was important as well. Furthermore, a framework which specifically addresses Black identity politics helps to

bring the study together. In addition to CRT which focuses on the analysis of oppression, pragmatic race criticism allows researchers to narrow the focus. “Increasingly, scholars in the field have come to realize that purely color-blind formulations and legalistic conceptual frameworks are inadequate to provide meaningful answers to the problem of race relations in America and the world” (Wright, 2011, p.666).

Glaude (2007) outlines the importance of this approach in identity politics which also translates well in educational research. Glaude explains in his opinion in the following statement.

I call an archeological approach and a pragmatic historicist approach--in each case focusing on its ethical dimensions. I argue that the pragmatic approach better enables us to understand the complex ethical choices that attend any talk about black identity. I further draw out the implications for contemporary debates about black identity of what I have called elsewhere a pragmatic tradition of racial advocacy (p.50).

Even further, this approach helped me as the researcher piece together different aspects of educational history and Black history to approach this study. It allowed me to bridge together my understanding of Dewey, Pestalozzi, and Rousseau with my knowledge of Du Bois, Washington, and Woodson to examine how the participants make decisions about their classroom practices. The following quote demonstrates the importance of the historicist pragmatic approach which looks at the past in order to guide the future.

The aim here is to ally ourselves with powers that dispense fortune in order to escape defeat and, perhaps, to experience triumph in the face of destruction. Second, we have invented arts: Housing, clothing, irrigation--all are examples of attempts to “construct a fortress out of the very conditions and forces” that threaten us (Glaude, 2007, p. 22).

### **Summary**

Throughout this review of the literature, I provided an overview of historical events of Black education, gendered norms in education, and the theoretical framework for this study.

While each section provided an overview and a foundation for the study, they also addressed a unique need due to the gap in literature and the need for a study that uses race and gender identity to address curriculum and teaching.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This study explored the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of Black male elementary educators. For the present study, I utilized Elliot Eisner's educational connoisseurship and criticism to examine how certain dimensions of schooling impact the teaching of Black male elementary educators (Eisner, 1998). This methodology combined with critical race theory (CRT) allowed me to address the study from two fields in educational studies: educational foundations and curriculum studies. CRT's focus on history allowed for examining the foundations of education established by Black curricularists such as Carter G. Woodson and acknowledging these theorists' contributions to the field of curriculum studies. The Black curricular theorists from which I drew inspiration are all male which coincided with the identities of the participants in this study. I felt it was important to align these two groups of people—curricular theorists and the participants—in order to draw comparisons and connections.

This chapter outlines not only the methodology of the study, but also provides a rationale for this type of inquiry. The chapter will also address how I selected participants, specific data collection methods, and how I ensured trustworthiness.

### **Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism**

“Connoisseurship is private, but criticism is public. Connoisseurs simply need to appreciate what they encounter. Critics, however, must render these qualities vivid by the artful use of critical disclosure” (Eisner, 1985, p. 92-93). Educational connoisseurship and criticism is a qualitative research method rooted in the arts (Eisner, 1998). With this method there is a focus on and discernment of nuances. Researchers who use this model rely on thick description in order to “see with” the subjects of their study (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Connoisseurship is a private act in which one appreciates the distinctiveness of what they are observing, and criticism provides the mode or language to make public the appreciation (Eisner, 1998). Such language can be artful to reflect the artistic teaching of the participants, to capture the art they create each day.

I chose educational criticism over other qualitative methodologies like narrative and portraiture, which lend themselves more towards the analysis of participants’ storytelling, to have room for artistic depictions of my participants. The artistic depictions allowed me to share the stories of my participants in a way that challenges the oppressive ideologies that surround them as Black men. Furthermore, Eisner’s methodology allowed participants to have more control over the data they supplied. The photographs the participants took showed their reflections and thought processes around their teaching practices. The photographs also provided me with an additional lens to use as I not only interpreted and analyzed my perceptions of how their identity and gender intersect to inform teaching, but I also analyzed their analyzations of themselves.

“Connoisseurship is the art of appreciation” (Eisner, 1998, p.63). Connoisseurship relies on criticism to make the unknown known. Rather than rely on the words of the storyteller alone,

criticism is structured into four dimensions of analysis: *description*, *interpretation*, *evaluation*, and *thematics* (Eisner, 1998). Eisner makes a point to address these dimensions as non-sequential, yet not wholly independent either, as “each dimension interacts with others. If a teacher changes the way he teaches (pedagogy), then all other dimensions are affected as well” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The fluid nature of the methodology allowed for me as the researcher to gain an accurate perception of how curricular decision-making and pedagogy intersects with not only the elementary teacher’s race and gender, but also the intentions of teachers, the school and classroom structures, and evaluation methods.

One other way to distinguish educational criticism and connoisseurship from other methods of qualitative inquiry is in its purpose, “...through criticism the connoisseur reveals the complexities of the educational enterprise and reeducates others’ perception of it. The primary aim is to bring about improvement, not just accountability” (Vars, 2002, p. 70). In this study, critical race theory informed my evaluation of the educational enterprise in which the participants worked. For example, my descriptions and interpretations of the participants’ experiences within the education system challenged the dominant ideology associated with it. I brought out the nuances that exist that made it difficult for my participants to teach with fidelity and make, what they perceived, the right curricular decisions for their students.

Educational criticism brought to light the nuances of the education system through the use of thick description. The rich description in the present study likens to a trend Eisner (2002) highlights that took place in the late 1960’s in which extensive observation followed by rich description becomes the norm. Educational practitioner Juli B. Kramer’s (2015) study on Jewish day schools utilized Educational Criticism to evaluate the schools’ effectiveness.

Researchers studying Jewish day schools, their effectiveness, and impact may glean a great deal from quantitative measures, but the full picture, the nuances and subtleties of how and why schools measure success, or not, can elude them. A research methodology designed to attend to the intricate nature of the educational experiences would better facilitate understanding these nuances, and Elliot Eisner's model of Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism (educational criticism) provides this methodology (Kramer, 2015, p.68).

As I approached this research, I not only considered my research interests, but the interest of stakeholders. Initially, I wanted something that I could give back to stakeholders and educational connoisseurship and criticism does that with its utilization of Eisner's five dimensions of schooling: *intentional, curricular, pedagogical, structural, and evaluative*. However, as I examined teaching practices within the school, I noticed how the participants' practices were influenced positively and negatively by childhood schooling experiences. Additionally, the participants were impacted by the campus cultures.

### **Perception and Appreciation**

This study examines the perceptions of Black male elementary teachers, specifically their opinion on the role of curriculum and instruction in their teaching practices. Perception is at the heart of connoisseurship. Moreover, perception is at the heart of this study. Eisner (1998) points out that, "perception manifests itself in experience and is a function of the transactions between the qualities of the environment and what we bring to those qualities. The character of that experience is in large measure influenced by our ability to differentiate among the qualities we attend to" (p. 63). The school environment has a large impact on the curricular and instructional decision-making practices of teachers of any race and gender. However, this study took into

consideration how the environment impacts Black male educators and the qualities they possess. Even further, this study moved away from labels and theories that do not provide a way of seeing these educators. As explored in the previous chapter, the labels placed on these educators are accompanied by both positive and negative stereotypes. The negative stereotypes of suspicious and problematic stand out the most. Because of this, I move away from labels and toward exploring the qualities in these educators and in the schools in which they teach. Moving away from labels and continuing with thick, rich description allowed me to focus in on seeing and appreciating the art of teaching the Black men exhibited.

### **Dimensions of Schooling**

Eisner (1998) identifies five dimensions of schooling that guide educational evaluation. The five dimensions are the intentional, the structural, the curricular, the pedagogical and the evaluative. While this study will tend to all five of the dimensions of schooling Eisner identified, it will largely focus on the curricular, intentional, and pedagogical dimensions. Part of the rationale for using Eisner's educational criticism over other methodologies was because of its specific attention to dimensions of schooling. Although separate, the dimensions of schooling are interlinked meaning that if one of the dimensions is altered, all dimensions are affected. In this study, the structural dimension which included the overall campus culture affected the ways in which Black male teachers made decisions about their teaching and curriculum. The intentions of the participants impacted the way they addressed the null curriculum and sought to restore the curriculum with what they perceived as vital.

### ***The Intentional Dimension***

Eisner characterized intentions by connecting it to aims and goals (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Those aims and goals are explicitly stated and advocated (Eisner, 1998). Eisner (1998)

notes that, “a teacher or a school district may endorse one kind of outcome, but in practice emphasize quite another. What occurs in practice may be far better than what the curriculum guide prescribes...”(p.73). As Eisner noted, schools may provide teachers with a specific curriculum, but how the teacher interprets the curriculum varies based on experience, or in the case of this study, gender and race. Furthermore, teachers do have intentions for their students’ learning that may not always be considered. Moroye (2009) used eco-educational criticism to explore not the school’s intentions, but intentions of individual ecologically minded teachers because, “Intentions guide, among other things, curricular choices, emphases, and omissions” (p. 793). Those curricular choices, including the emphases and omissions, were of great importance to the study.

### ***The Curricular Dimension***

Eisner (1998) defines the curricular dimension as an awareness of what is being taught. “One of the most important aspects of connoisseurship focuses upon the quality of the curriculum’s content and goals and the activities employed to engage students in it” (Eisner, 1998, p. 75). I am interested in the questions of curriculum implementation that address pacing, higher order thinking, and student engagement (Eisner, 1998). However, I am also interested in seeing how the different types of curriculum present themselves in the classrooms of these teachers. For example, the previous chapter identified Afrocentric curriculum as the null curriculum—something not taught— in many schools. While this subject may not be one that is specific to elementary teachers, it is important to note the deliberative practices these teachers utilize in content selection (Flinders, et al., 1986). Again, the utilization of certain curriculum types is something that is often associated with being a campus or district decision, but in this study I used the qualitative data collected from the participants to interpret themes of different

types of curricula including, but not limited to, the null curriculum, hidden curriculum, and the complementary curriculum. Institutional and societal norms and practices characterize the hidden curriculum (Moroye, 2009). The complementary curriculum, while similar, is an addition solely from the subtle expression of the teacher's beliefs that may enhance or hinder the educative process (Moroye, 2009).

### ***The Pedagogical Dimension***

Eisner's (1998) definition of the pedagogical dimension rests on the idea that teachers mediate the curriculum, and that learning is not limited to teachers' intentions. Therefore, the same curriculum can be taught and addressed in many ways based on who teaches the curriculum. Another reason for choosing educational criticism is that it allows educational connoisseurs to "address the very qualities of teaching that typically elude standardized observation schedules and standardized achievement tests" (Eisner, 1998, p. 77). Administrator observations and standardized test results affect how teachers enact their craft. This also leads to the assumption that there are "best practices" for teaching. Connoisseurship assumes none of this, and in fact, relies on context for the researcher to examine the nuances that exist within the classroom and how the teacher responds to it. "Educational connoisseurship is enhanced and perception made more acute as the context is known. Since the perception of qualities in school situations is almost always interpreted, knowing the features of the context is likely to make the interpretation more defensible and more equitable" (p.78). As schools seek to establish culturally responsive and other equitable teaching practices, educational criticism can be used for observation, dialogue and analysis in order to make room for those practices.

## **Race Focused Criticism**

Educational criticism allows for a variety of adaptations including eco-educational criticism (Moroye, 2009) and pragmatic race criticism (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). In the present study, I drew upon the theoretical framework presented in chapter two, critical race theory, to include race-focused criticism in this study. In terms of methodology, Uhrmacher et al. (2017) outline how pragmatic race theorists approach their studies by enhancing critical race theory with the use of reflection, discussion, and action. They go on to summarize their actions:

1. Race-focused educational critics pay close attention to the qualities of the contexts that they are studying with an eye toward matters of race.
2. They also pay attention to “situated” factors that add meaning and understanding to the racial context under study.
3. They extend the vocabulary we might use to examine schools and classrooms with the charge of understanding a new global America.
4. They pay attention to the intentional, operational, and received curricula noting the congruence or lack thereof, with an eye toward the significance of each for diverse students (p.78).

As mentioned previously, context is what educational connoisseurs examine in relation to the participants in their research. Race focused criticism provides a way to focus more on the reactions of participants, especially in the face of race matters such as racism and microaggressions. Since critical race theory includes a commitment to social justice as its guiding principles, I felt as though I had a duty to share the participants’ experiences in meaningful ways in order to bring attention to how racism informs teaching and learning.



To conclude this section on educational connoisseurship and criticism, which defines the methodology and provides a rationale for its use in this study, it is important to note how arts-based qualitative inquiry provides a unique way of creating knowledge. Educational criticism and other creative methodologies allowed the researcher to move past watching and listening towards capturing nuance through seeing and hearing (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Uhrmacher et al., 2017). In educational criticism, the researcher gathers sensory data and utilizes his or her own skills of reasoning, valuing, appreciating and discerning to construct meaning. This is necessary to move past stereotyping the underrepresented group of teachers in this study.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Overview of Methods**

Informed by critical race theory, I used educational connoisseurship and criticism to answer the following research questions:

- Q1     What are the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students?
- Q2     How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?
- Q3     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?

While educational criticism served as the methodology for this study, I utilized interviews—both semi-structured and unstructured—observations, artifact collection, and autophotography. After conducting an initial, semi-structured interview with participants during which I provided an overview for autophotography, I then conducted four thirty-minute observations of each participant teaching. I concluded the study by reviewing the participant selected photographs during an unstructured interview. Participants in this study included four

Black male elementary teachers across three different campuses within one suburban school district outside of Dallas, Texas.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were Black males who work in an instructional capacity in an elementary school. All participants identified as Black and male. Each of the participants had varying years of experience. The two bookends of the study in regards to age had the least amount of teaching experience. One recently graduated from college and was in the middle of his second year of teaching. The other, a Black man in his mid-fifties, had seven years of experience. The other two men were in their early forties and had between ten to fifteen years of experience each. All four participants worked in schools led by Black principals. Three of the participants worked in schools led by Black women, while one worked at a school led by a Black man.

Convenience sampling is the selection of a sample based on money, location, and other criterion while network sampling is purposeful in nature in the recruitment of participants who meet the participant criterion and who may be able to connect the researcher to other potential participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Both of these sampling methods allowed me to recruit Black male elementary educators with diverse teaching experiences as the demographics within my district vary greatly between schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My current work as a district level administrator in a large suburban district outside of Dallas, Texas provided me with access to a variety of education professionals. I also utilized my connections within my district, Black Educators Rock of North Texas (Facebook), @BMEsTalk (Twitter), and the Richardson Area Alliance of Black School Educators (RAABSE) to recruit participants. I sent emails to potential participants, which included a recruitment flyer. I also shared the same flyer in the groups I listed. These geographical boundaries allowed me to conduct interviews in person and

classroom observations. Additionally, each participant received a \$25 gift card to a Black-owned bakery or business of their choosing.

After recruiting potential participants, I planned to narrow down to four participants. I initially received interest from eight potential participants. However, after I filtered participants by asking questions in the survey to gauge their involvement in curriculum planning and their awareness of their instructional practices (see Appendix A), I received exactly four participants. Narrowing the number of participants down to four participants was purposeful because it allowed me to collect data in a timely manner that was conducive for myself as a working educational professional, and the participants (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Once I identified the four participants, I worked to schedule interviews and observations that were conducive to their schedules. Participants received participant consent forms (Appendix B) which they signed and returned to me prior to or at the initial interview. The participant consent forms outlined the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and explained that they could withdraw at any time during the duration of the study.

As I was present for a portion of the teachers' work life and examined it, I sought approval for conducting research through the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (Appendix J) prior to recruitment. With respect to confidentiality, I utilized pseudonyms throughout the study. To protect against any potential privacy risks, I stored transcribed interviews in a password protected electronic file. I am the only one with access to this file. I will store paper data in a locked file cabinet. Again, I am the only one with access to the key to this file cabinet.

## Data Collection

The primary data collection process included interviews, observations, and artifact collection. One specific mode of artifact collection used in this study is autophotography, which is a method that implores participants to take photographs of their environment for the sole purpose of using the works as data. Once I obtained proper site approval, participants signed a consent form that explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and that they could withdraw at any time during the duration of the study. Once I obtained consent, I began the data collection process.

For each research question, I identified data collection tools. Doing this allowed me to be aware of the purpose behind each tool, and thus better able to utilize the tool during the study. Table 1 highlights the research questions, participants, and data collection tools.

**Table 1**

### *Data Collection Tools*

<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Collection Tools</b>
EdCrit	What are the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students?	4 Black male school educators	Interview Autophotography
EdCrit	How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?	4 Black male school educators	Interview Autophotography Lesson Plan Artifacts Observations
EdCrit	In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?	4 Black male school educators	Interview Artifacts Observations

The first question addressed the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students. To answer this question, I utilized interviewing to provide a clear direct way to gather information. However, I realized that interviews alone would not elicit the depth I desired in pursuing this study. Because of this, one of the main tools I used for this question is autophotography, which allowed participants to photograph certain aspects of their professional life to aid in answering research questions (Yang, 2012).

The second question allowed me as the researcher to examine how cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices. To answer this particular question I employed interviewing and autophotography. In addition to those three tools, I collected the following artifacts: lesson plans and student work samples. Lastly, I observed each participant teach four thirty minute lessons.

The final research question allowed me to address the influence of campus culture on the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers. To answer this question I employed interviews and observations.

Guided by Eisner's (1998) idea that, "Information becomes data only if a researcher is able to make it meaningful," I collected photocopies or photographs of documents that display the intersection of cultural identity and gender and how they inform curricular decision-making and instructional practices, their intentions for student-learning, and how the campus culture influences all of these. The initial interview was a time for me to inform them of the one artifact collection mode—autophotography--that required additional participation.

### ***Interviews***

Once I gained consent, I scheduled the initial one-on-one interview between myself and each participant. Having an initial interview kept with the traits of educational critics who

typically begin with interviews prior to observations (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The audio recorded initial interviews took place in the participants' classrooms. The semi-structured interview consisted of questions about their experiences as Black male educators, their instructional practices, and how they make decisions regarding their curricula. I provided each participant with a copy of the interview questions prior to our meetings (Appendix C). Since the initial interview occurred before any observations, I used a descriptive interview style which elicited sensory details from participants (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). During the initial interview, I also collected some artifacts, and explained the process for autophotography (Appendix D).

The follow-up interview (Appendix E) took place immediately after the final observation. I devoted a majority of this time to listening and exploring with the participants as they shared their autophotography results. The follow-up interview served as a time for participants to share any reflections, thoughts, or ideas they developed since our last meeting. The participants had varying responses to autophotography due to personal choice and ability. The collections I received, while not consistent, display who these men are and how they see themselves as educators. Since I focused on the participants' reflection, I used an unstructured/informal interview process. Unstructured interviews allowed for more open-ended questions and flexibility. Furthermore, I recognize I am an outsider in terms of gender and experience. Because of my lack of knowledge with this phenomenon, an unstructured interview was best (Merriam & Tiswell, 2016). The follow-up interview took place approximately four weeks after the initial interview occurred. This was done partly because it allowed for adequate participant reflection, but also because I needed to allow time to interview all participants.

### *Autophotography*

I used autophotography as a method to enhance the depth and detail of the data. Autophotography is one ethnographic participant photography method (Glaw et al., 2017). “Autophotography requires participants to take photographs reflecting the situation and their own viewpoints about the research topic, and then to describe their perception, thoughts, and emotions with their photographs” (Yang, 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, autophotography “allows researchers to capture and articulate the ways identity guides human action and thought” (Noland, 2006). As I considered the way identity influences teaching and curricular choices, autophotography provided a lens for these practices. Noland (2006) also argues “it is from pictures that the construction of the self can be best illuminated.” In keeping with the theoretical framework of critical race theory, autophotography allowed me to consider the ways in which marginalized voices can contribute to research whilst also challenging dominant ideology (Allen, 2020; Noland, 2006). Furthermore, participants were able to make meaning of their identities and shared that with not only me, but also the consumers of my research. “As a critical pedagogy and decolonizing methodology, the image production process in participatory visual projects are acts of knowledge production that critique modes of oppression and articulate a vision of a more just reality” (Allen, 2020, p. 8).

Autophotography allowed the participants more control and ownership over their selections. In fact, each participant interpreted the autophotography projects differently. Two participants provided a mixture of photographs taken by themselves and of themselves, but did not include captions. Another participant created short videos (that could be turned into stills) set to music and included captions. One participant simply selected photos or images and captioned them. In the follow-up interview, the participants brought the photographs along with any

journaling they had done. The photographs and journal entries served as both a guide for not only the interview, but also as data for the study (Glaw et al., 2017).

Ardoin et al. (2013) conducted a series of pilot studies in which youth enrolled in an environmental education day camp utilized participant photography to share their program-related interests and situational interests. One of the findings from their study was that, autophotography yielded more representations of situational interest; whereas the reflective journal entries were almost all solely related to program activities. As I considered autophotography, I realized that I may receive more situational results rather than those relating to identity and teaching. In light of this, I informally gathered data on whether providing guidance for both taking and captioning photographs would elicit results directly relating to identity and teaching. Teachers in the district in which I work completed a similar photography project to earn staff development credit. As someone who developed the assignment, I looked at those teachers' projects for guidance on how to set up the study.

### ***Observations***

In between the two interviews, I conducted four observations of the participants' classroom teaching. The observations were thirty minutes in length and took place within their classrooms. I used an observational protocol (Appendix G) to ensure I recorded accurately and allowed for reflection. In order to provide thick descriptions and build themes that are hallmark to the educational criticism methodology, I recorded other aspects of the observation such as descriptions of the participant and physical setting, as well as, my reactions to what took place during the observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As I mentioned earlier, my hope for this study was that it was something that educational stakeholders could use to transform their processes. The most important stakeholders are the



participants, not because I expect them to transform their teaching, but to see how transformative their teaching is. Because of this, I wanted to be able to share with them my analysis of their interviews, photographs, and my observations. In order to do this within a timely manner, I adhered to a flexible, but firm data collection timeline. Table 2 provides an overview of the timeline for the dissertation process. Table 3 outlines the data collection process.

**Table 2**

*Timeline for Dissertation*

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October 2020	Proposal Defense
December 2020	Institutional Review Board Submission Identify Four Participants
January 2021	Institutional Review Board Approval Obtain Site Permission
February 2021	Initial Interviews
March 2021	Initial Observations (1-2) Code & Analyze Data
April 2021	Observations (3-4) Follow-up Interviews
May 2021	Code & Analyze Data Write Dissertation
June 2021	Dissertation Defense

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**Table 3***Timeline for Data Collection*


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Day 1	Initial Interview Autophotography Overview
Day 2	Observation 1
Day 3	Observation 2
Day 4	Observation 3
Day 5	Observation 4
Day 5	Follow-up Interview

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**Data Analysis**

In keeping with the characteristics and traits of an educational critic, I began with describing the educational practices of Black male elementary educators. To do this, I described rather than theorized which entails thick description and attention to the subtleties and nuances that characterized my observations (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). These descriptions provided readers with not only a depiction of the events I witnessed but also provided the basis for interpretation. “To interpret is to place into context, to explain, to unwrap, to explicate. It is, as some might say, a hermeneutic activity of ‘decoding’ the messages within the system” (Eisner, 1998, p. 97). I connected the decoded messages back to the research about Black male teachers. In order to evaluate the practices of the teachers, and determine how to improve the overall trajectory for them, I utilized description to elicit multiple interpretations. Additionally, because of the various data collection methods utilized throughout this study, I employed descriptive coding throughout the analysis process. Descriptive coding is characterized by summaries in the form of words or phrases; they are not abbreviations of content, but rather identifications of the topics (Saldaña,

2015). From those results, I developed interpretations of the collected data. Furthermore, in keeping with the aesthetic perspective associated with this methodology, I gave the titles of the codes meaningful, artful names (Uhrmacher, et al., 2017). Those interpretations served as the basis of evaluation, and generated themes.

Determining the themes was important because they must be responsive to the purpose of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Describing, interpreting, and evaluating, allowed for the development of conceptually congruent themes, meaning the same level of abstraction characterizes the themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, this process allowed me to adhere to the characteristics of race-focused criticism by paying close attention to the qualities of the contexts I studied. Lastly, rather than use the term coding which finds its roots in the sciences, I employed annotation, which seemed more apt in this arts-based research methodology. Annotation allowed me to consider such nuances as voice, tone, imagery, and syntax--all characteristics of literary analysis. As Uhrmacher et al. (2017) note, annotation offers “a new way of seeing the [poem] as an interconnected whole” (p.57).

Like the other data collection methods in this study, to analyze the autophotography results, I did so with the critical race theory framework in mind, meaning that participants provided their own analysis of their photos. Critical race theory rests on the idea of challenging dominant ideology, which in this scenario would seek to challenge the dynamics between researcher and participant. In order to give voice to the participants, it was important that I not only disclose what they captured through photography, but allow their purview to define those images and captions. I used descriptive coding of their interview transcripts to provide further analysis.

### *Trustworthiness*

To increase the trustworthiness of this research study, I used the three aspects Eisner identified as needed for credibility. The first of these is structural corroboration. Similar to triangulation, structural corroboration can best be defined as “the presence of a coherent, persuasive whole picture” (p.59). It also is comparable to the judicial system’s circumstantial evidence which is used when there is no eyewitness to a crime committed (Eisner, 1998). All the different types of data collected not only complement each other, but they validate each other. In this study, the data I collected validated the criticism I present despite varying interpretations among other researchers observing the same phenomena.

I utilized consensual validation to increase trustworthiness. When I first considered this validity criterion, I approached it as I was first concerned with accuracy and wanted to call on the expertise of former Black male elementary teachers to review my criticism. However, in re-reading Eisner, I came to view my role as a critic differently. As a critic I bring a different perspective and address different dimensions than another critic covering the same topic (Eisner, 1991). I now see the criticism I wrote as a persuasive rendering with which people could agree or disagree, but would find value and knowledge. As Eisner (1992) points out, “Consensual validation in criticism is typically a consensus won from readers who are persuaded by what the critic has had to say, not by consensus among several critics” (p. 113). This consensus from the readers remained in the forefront of my thoughts as I designed the study, especially throughout the member-checking process.

Lastly, referential adequacy was of the utmost importance to me as a critic as I wanted to ensure that teachers, researchers, teacher-educators, and educators find this study important to the work they do in educating a diverse population, and preparing diverse educators. Member

checking and developing interview questions that address the study's significance allowed for referential adequacy. Uhrmacher et al. (2017) notes the importance of referential adequacy in a study and the role of the critic. "The critic provides guideposts, such as in a travel guide, for those exploring educational terrain. Thus, not a single definitive criticism stands to tell the 'truth' about a situation, but rather, the criticism could be one of many" (p. 60). To reiterate, referential adequacy ensures that the study can stand on its own and among other similar academic works.

### ***Transferability***

Each participant took part in an initial semi-structured interview, four thirty-minute classroom observations with a checklist, and one unstructured follow-up interview. I brought the checklist with me and used it to help me take note of important aspects like the racial make-up of the students and the setting of the classroom, I ended up writing more in my journal which I also brought with me. Journaling during and immediately afterwards allowed me to capture what I observed immediately.

Interviewing and observing teachers in different elementary grade levels and elementary school settings allowed me to measure transferability throughout the duration of the study. During the observations, trustworthiness increased with the utilization of the observation checklist, along with anecdotal notes, during all thirty-minute lesson observations. I summarized observation notes to add to the detail and context of the study, which enhanced my thematic analysis process which allowed for transferability. In order to further increase trustworthiness I provided vivid descriptions in the form of vignettes, including direct quotations (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and sent a final draft of the results to all participants to allow for member checking, a process commonly known as participant validation. Participant validation allows the researcher to determine credibility through participants reviewing parts of the work (Birt et al., 2016).

An additional measure used to increase the study's trustworthiness was multiple sources of data collection: interviews, observations, artifact collection, and autophotography. Using these different tools allowed for triangulation in the study. The use of cross checking when annotating and finding themes in the data during the analysis process occurred by finding themes in the data provided by the four participants.

### ***Validity***

I validated the interviews by audio recording and kept an audit trail by taking notes during and after the interviews as well as transcribing all interviews to allow for accurate coding. I also used Eisner's description of the ways educational critics can meet reasonable standards of credibility as a guide for establishing validity. One area of importance was structural corroboration. This allowed me to gather the whole picture of the participants' experiences, but also consider idiosyncrasies and anomalies that presented themselves. Structural corroboration required that I check my ongoing observations and thoughts against my initial impressions (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

### **Limitations**

The very nature of this research study and the subjects selected for study invited limitations, as they are a distinct, but small population. Additionally, utilizing educational criticism as opposed to other methodologies like narrative inquiry did not allow for the telling of one's life story or the focus on it, which could be vital in determining why there is a gap in research and a lack of representation of Black male educators in the elementary grades.

I struggled to determine the limitations of the study due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. However, once in the classroom I could see how communication and teaching were negatively impacted by social distancing, distance learning, and masks. Nevertheless, I was

dedicated to gathering as much information in order to reflect these voices in educational research.

### **Conclusion**

By studying the educational practices of Black male elementary educators, my goal was not only to provide a platform for those participants and the larger community they represent, but to re-examine what is considered curriculum studies. This includes identifying the null curriculum of curriculum studies by examining the voices not included. Additionally, I wanted to reimagine teaching, and how the art of Black men could enhance practice. This chapter identified the reasons for using educational criticism and how it coalesced with critical race theory to address the nuanced teaching and curricular decision-making of Black male elementary teachers. The next chapter provides the rich descriptions of the Black men and the interpretations of their instructional practices and curricular decision-making.

## CHAPTER IV

### DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

#### **Aperture: Images in Focus**

I can recall the spring semester of my senior year of college sitting in the first and only foundations of education course offered during my undergraduate teacher education program and asking the instructor, “why are we earning a bachelor of science in education instead of a bachelor of arts?” My instructor reminded me of the number of courses required in mathematics and science needed to complete this degree which was way too many for this English minor to take, but also noted that if we are going to ever see teaching as the art that it is, the requirements and the title of the degree need to change. While the title of this study emphasizes the curricular decision-making and instructional practices of Black male elementary teachers, I am also looking at the art of teaching. Eisner’s ecology of schooling allows me to focus on three dimensions of that art--the intentions, curriculum, and pedagogy. Lastly, educational criticism allows me to apply an arts-based research method to the overall study which again reinforces the belief that teaching is an art.

The following research questions guided me while completing this study:

- Q1     What are the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students?
- Q2     How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?
- Q3     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?



While I did not realize it when I chose these questions, I constructed two questions that examine barriers or enhancers to one's teaching craft. The second question examines how cultural identity, specifically Black ethnicity, and gender—being male—influences curriculum and teaching. Similarly, their race and gender can also enhance their craft because of—or in spite of—those same stereotypes. Research question three also encompasses stereotypes, but examines how the campus culture enhances or interrupts participants' plans for curriculum and instruction. All participants chose ethnically diverse schools with the intention of enhancing the lives of all students. Additionally, all participants work in schools with Black principals leading a mostly White and female staff.

The first research question addresses the intentions of the participants for their students, specifically what their *intended curriculum* is. In this question, I capture not only the art of teaching, but also the art of curriculum design. Later in this chapter, I share how the participants include the null curriculum, or what participants alluded to as Black history and Black pride, in their intended curriculum. The study will also reveal how that changed in the *operational curriculum*, or the curriculum that occurred.

### **Organization of the Chapter**

I use the term aperture to describe this overall chapter. Aperture comes from photography and refers to the amount of light allowed to pass through the lens. It is measured in F-Stops with f/1.4 allowing in the most light or exposure, and f16 allows for the least amount of exposure (Nikonusa.com, 2021). In this chapter, my descriptions and interpretations allow for the most exposure. I use an open lens to capture and share in vignettes. I begin each participant's section with a description of the participant. The description begins with their chosen pseudonym. Then, I move into the intentional dimension. After that I proceed into the curricular and pedagogical

dimensions. Towards the end of each section, I include vignettes from their autophotography projects. This allows for the least amount of exposure from the researcher as it is their art, and their words about who they are and how they make decisions regarding curriculum and instruction. It is almost as if they take the camera and control the exposure. The “final shot” of the section includes my interpretations of their autophotography, and how it ties back into previously shared thoughts on curriculum and pedagogy. At the end of the chapter, I provide a brief summary before moving to Chapter Five.

### ***The Final Shot***

I purposely end each participant section with vignettes from the autophotography projects. While educational connoisseurship and criticism provides a way for me to express my own interpretations and creation of themes around my participants’ lived experiences as Black male elementary teachers, autophotography allows for them to make meaning of their experience. I include the participants in the data collection process. Instead of me selecting meaningful artifacts, they utilized autophotography to select photographs that were meaningful to them as Black men and teachers.

Since I did not collect the photos until the end of my time with each participant, my hope was that each participant moved toward autophotography after our initial interview and during observations with excitement. However, I was rather naive in that hope. To guide them in this endeavor, I identified some points of consideration for selecting photographs. I instructed them to think about their identities and their role on campus. I also instructed them to think about their intentions for their students, and instructed them to repeat that process when they captioned their photographs. For one participant, taking, selecting, and captioning photos proved to be a daunting task. The task did not invite them to pause and reflect; instead, it created more anxiety.

Nevertheless, he did provide photographs and some captions. Another participant did not take photographs, but did select a few images that aligned with who he was as a Black male teacher. For others, it was an opportunity to reflect on themselves and what brought them to elementary teaching and what keeps them there. They were able to tie in the questions I asked about their childhood experiences in elementary school with who they are today. For one, autophotography was an opportunity to create. While all participants were able to express themselves through photography, one participant also included videography as his own medium to create art that explored who he was as a Black male elementary teacher and a person. These varied responses from participants provided even more insight into their personalities which I will explore in each participant's section.

### **Gentle Lawrence**

When I first entered Lawrence's classroom, I was struck by how warm the room felt. There was nothing extravagant about the decor or the layout as it seemed typical to what one would find in a kindergarten classroom - bright colors, sight words, various manipulatives, and desk shields as students learned during a pandemic. More than that, Lawrence's presence provided the warmth in that empty classroom during our first meeting.

Lawrence seemed nervous at first, and even asked how personal this process would be. I assured him that he could make this as personal as he wanted. He then asked if there would be space for LGBTQ+ issues, and I said that while I did not specifically set out to focus on LGBTQ+ issues there would be space for all of the identities of each participant. He seemed to feel more at ease after hearing that.

This was Lawrence's second year of teaching kindergarten. A young teacher, he graduated in 2019 from a historically Black university in Texas, and immediately began working

on a master's in educational leadership and policy studies though he has no intention of moving into administration. His school is nestled within a neighborhood and faces the back of the feeder junior high school. The student population of the school is diverse with students of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. The school has a large international population with students from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Two Black female administrators lead the school. While there is some diversity in teaching staff, the majority of teachers are White and female. The diversity of students is something Lawrence enjoys, but he does note that he does not always connect with the staff. He describes a friendly, cordial relationship with all of the teachers. While staff relationships and the impact it has on teaching may have been more important to some participants, it did not initially come across as something that bothers Lawrence, or negatively influences his craft.

This selection on Lawrence begins with the intentional dimension, and then moves into the curricular and pedagogical dimensions. Finally, descriptions and interpretations of his autophotography conclude this section.

### **Intentions of Care: In Their Corner**

Lawrence's own childhood served as a catalyst for his career. His elementary experience was overwhelmingly positive, and he shared that his first Black male elementary teacher taught him in first grade. His classroom functions as a family, and he not only encourages, but expects his classroom to be free from put-downs. "I feel like as a teacher in the classroom of 21 students, it's so important to have a familiar culture. My students are referred to as warriors, because it's just important. Like we have this big community. We have to love on each other" (Lawrence). This sense of community and near zero tolerance towards put-downs and negativity echoes the

care and community his own first grade teacher built in his classroom. Lawrence lamented that he wished he could reach out to his teacher to share how he felt about him:

I wish I could reach out. I wish I could get in touch with him to tell him. Um, I just remember some like how he approached me as a student, um, how he was just so personable with me. And I could tell he was more personable with me because I was a different young boy at the time. So I could tell like one time he would just pull me over to the side of the classroom just to talk with me. As I remember the students were being mean to me, cause I said my favorite color was pink, and he just says it's okay to like pink. It's okay to like black. Whatever you like in life just make sure whatever you like it makes you happy. And he gave me this big old hug and was like it's going to be alright (Lawrence).

While this unique experience occurred in first grade, he reiterates how positive elementary school was because of his caring teachers:

I would say that my elementary experience, it taught me how to love being a student. Um and I appreciate, like, my elementary years because anytime that was the time in school when I performed the highest as a student. I feel like I had my most sincere teachers or the most caring teachers than I did in all my years, I would say except high school...It's those people who compose of that timeline. That really did it for me or really contributed positive memories of that (Lawrence).

Lawrence highlights a characteristic of responsiveness in his teachers Noddings (2005) calls confirmation. This can be seen in Lawrence's first grade teacher's response to being bullied. While Lawrence may not have known how his teacher addressed his classmates, he did see his teacher being responsive to his needs at the time. In Lawrence and his first grade

teacher's conversation, his teacher not only validates his choices but also confirms that what he sees in Lawrence is good and something that needs to be nurtured (Noddings, 2005).

Lawrence's teacher helped to move Lawrence toward his better self through confirmation—the act of affirming and encouraging (Noddings, 2005).

Lawrence practices this act of confirmation in his teaching. During morning meeting/SEL time, Lawrence takes the time to capitalize on affirming and encouraging, but it is during academic instruction, specifically literacy where the connections he makes to the students' lives invite more personal stories to be shared by students. He poses questions to them like, "who are you becoming?" and "what do you want to be when you grow up?" He does that because wants them to know he's "in their corner." Lawrence expands on this in our final interview:

Generally, I'm a person that I want to see people do better. I want them to grow. I want them to chase after whatever their heart desires. I remember I saw this poster, um, that says the future belongs to the people who believe in the beauty of their dreams. I think that's such a phenomenal thing because when you are a teacher, you have to care about your students. Like you have to be in their corner.

Being in their corner helps Lawrence to guide students towards their own desires which he recognizes as being important.

### **Capturing Curriculum**

While there is some overlap in curriculum and pedagogy, I examined the ways in which Lawrence crafted his curriculum. Through the artifacts provided, I saw that most of what he used came from prescribed curriculum from the district in which he worked. Because of this, two questions from Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) narrative study text on teachers as curriculum planners became my own: (1) Do the people running the program want teachers to put their own

stamp on the program? (2) Or do they simply want teachers to bring their personal traits to bear on doing something that the implementers have defined? As I examined the materials, I had a difficult time determining if they were “teacher-proof,” or made to be personalized by the teacher. The materials were certainly utilized in their traditional form in that they were used primarily for whole group instruction. I looked at the materials and how they were used in Lawrence’s class. He appeared to bring his own personal traits to the curriculum, but did not stray too much outside of their intended use. “And so I go about implementing the curriculum, however, as I go about implementing the curriculum, like I follow the steps, but I like to add some spice to it, if you will” (Lawrence).

Instead of straying from the curriculum materials, Lawrence provided additional, teacher-created curriculum materials. In terms of curriculum, the intentional or explicit curriculum lacked components that Lawrence picked up on as being essential to his learners. What one might consider to be the null curriculum actually became the operational curriculum. In this case, the missing null curriculum is what the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines as self-awareness. Self-awareness is important because it helps to foster a growth mindset and a healthy sense of optimism, both of which are essential to learning. The materials alone provide the content, but Lawrence developed additional materials that coincided with his instructional style. These teacher-created materials emphasize the same skills covered, but allow him to use them in a variety of ways. For example, for phonics, he narrows down the word beginnings or endings covered to two each week, He finds word endings for each of the words, and then he can use them to quiz in small groups, or as he likes to do so in large group competitions. This is where the self-awareness component that was once part of the null curriculum comes into action. While repetitious practices help students to master the skills, by

only focusing on two pairs per week, students are able to better master the skills which helps them to see that they *can* learn the material. Students can set easier, measurable goals for phonics. So, instead of having teacher-set goals, I heard students make goals for themselves and their class for learning to identify different word endings. Furthermore, the students seemed to connect more with the teacher-created materials. For example, I observed Lawrence redirect students periodically when the class utilized the district-provided curriculum materials. However, when Lawrence pulled out the teacher-created charts, graphic organizers, and other materials, students could not put their hands down--they all wanted to answer questions.

I observed the ways in which the null, hidden and operational curricula interact. Lawrence's ethic of care resonated throughout the way he used district-provided materials and then supplemented with materials he created. It became very apparent that Lawrence wants his students to learn the material, but also begin to think about thinking and take ownership over their educational progress. In his development of curriculum materials, one could see him extend care and his students acknowledge they receive it through their excitement for learning.

### **Lawrence's Art of Teaching**

Teaching requires for its artistic expression routines with which to work; the teacher must have available repertoires to draw on.

—Eisner, 2002, p. 155

Upon entering Lawrence's classroom, one can see that artistic expression routines are present. He has traditional modes of routine expressed throughout such as the daily agenda and objectives which serve more as a guide for visitors rather than the students in his class. However, one expressive routine is that of music and movement. "Um, as an African-American male, I would say I put a greater emphasis on movement and music. And of course, as a, as a primary grades teacher, it's very important to just use musical ways to really assimilate new learning"



(Lawrence). Each morning and during transitions, students listen to and dance to “Watch the Letters Get Down-Reggae Remix” by Dr. Anthony Broughton on YouTube. The music and dance routines are expressive, and help to reiterate the sounds and animals associated with the letters of the alphabet. The students all sing the song along with the video, and they do the actions along with Dr. Broughton. Even though it is routine, the students approach the music as though it is a fresh, new song.

Lawrence uses this as an instructional strategy, but it also provides a much needed brain break for the little learners. Although they do their best to keep up with the actions, all the students appear relaxed. They move around for a bit before they move into the next lessons-- which often require a lot of focus. While Lawrence does not always embed music into his lessons, he appeals to auditory learners through his use of call and repeat and tactile learners by having them point to each word in the daily readers.

### ***Watch the Letters Get Down***

“Alright, children, let’s get ready for our letter song!” Lawrence sings to his students as he changes his laptop screen to the YouTube page for Dr. Broughton. His students make their way out of their chairs. Some hop up, while others linger around still waking up on this early morning.

As soon as the beat “drops,” the students are lively, even the sleepest of the tiny learners. The catchy song even gets me into a dancing mood. I quickly make a mental note that after four sporadic visits to Lawrence’s class, I now know all the lyrics to the song, and have even shared it with my own kindergarten daughter. I am also not too shy to dance along with them. As soon as the song is over, Lawrence makes the transition into reading. He starts by asking questions about

a time they did something exciting. Almost comically scripted, the little scholars start sharing variations of the same story.

“My dad took me to a barbeque with our family. We shot off fireworks” (Student 1).

“My uncle had a barbeque, but it wasn’t for July 4<sup>th</sup>” (Student 2).

“I had a barbeque and we went swimming” (Student 3).

A few students shared other stories, including one student who shared about playing the Internet game “Among Us.”

“What is Mungus?” Lawrence asks. The class erupts in giggles. A few students attempt to explain the popular video game to him, but Lawrence moves on to the reading selection. As I sit reflecting on this final observation with his students, I anticipate that the students will get out their “reading finger.” Lawrence continues to emphasize rhythm and movement with his students as they point to each word they read aloud in a chant and response style. I get up to move to the other side of the room, gather my things, and head toward the door. While my interactions with the kids were limited, I notice a few student take their “reading finger” and give a “school wave” to me—a motion made by bending and un-bending the pointer finger.

### ***A Dose of Healthy Competition***

Lawrence’s expressive repertoire also relies on a healthy dose of competition as motivation for learning. In some of my observations, I saw firsthand how he used competition. “So I use the, the district curriculum, but I do like to adapt it to just how my students are feeling for the day or how I feel like, um, just to get them more engaged and more interactive. Um, so one of the things I like to do in here of course, because we’re warriors, I embrace the competitive spirit” (Lawrence). Lawrence does refer to his students as warriors and reminds them that they can overcome any obstacle. During one particular lesson, he splits the class up into two groups:

boys and girls. He would hold up a word that ended in either “-en” or “-an” and each group takes turns identifying the proper ending. With each round, the kindergartners grow more and motivated to participate. By the end of the game, students stand to cheer each other on in hopes of being the winning team. Lawrence provides no extrinsic award, but the motivation from the competition and the support from Lawrence creates a rewarding atmosphere.

Lawrence’s competition illustrates the fast-paced, up-beat environment each of the participants displayed. One can see that their lively, energetic personality enhances learner engagement, but also it was done to keep up with one of the demands of their profession: not enough time. Lawrence, like others, mentioned the district curriculum. In this space I share how the district curriculum appeared to impede on Lawrence’s pedagogy. As I mentioned earlier, Lawrence displayed a daily agenda in his classroom. I alluded to the fact that it is not displayed for the emergent readers, but for the visitors. During the time that I observe Lawrence, he has many visitors---teachers and aides pulled students for testing or small groups. This impedes on his time. Lawrence rushes to get through the material before someone else grabs a student away. In addition, campus leaders, instructional coaches, and district curriculum leaders could walk in at any moment to assess Lawrence and his students. Lawrence does not seem bothered by this, and even in our interviews he does not mention this as a constraint. However, from my observations, the adherence to the agenda and the constraints of time inhibit expressiveness and fully being able to draw from his repertoire, as they have to transition quickly to the next content area.

### **Lawrence's Lens: "I am a Teacher!"**

Let me choose photos that show me in the way that brought me here. Um, that keeps me here. Um, and it shows a side of myself that, you know, just me as me as an individual.

— Lawrence

As I walk up to the elementary school where he works for our final interview, Lawrence meets me. He walked a little Black boy outside to meet his father. This is almost thirty minutes after school dismisses, on a Friday no less, and Lawrence meets this father with patience and reassurance that he would always be there for his son. The father and the boy's mother had miscommunicated about who was picking up the child and he explains that as the reason for his delay. However, I see the father's relief that his son is okay and in good hands with Lawrence.

As Lawrence and I sat down to discuss his pictures, I felt that same sense of relief. The warmth I felt my first day entering his room comes back as we discuss his pictures and pedagogy. Our exploration into more photos continues in the same positive manner with him showing me a picture of him in his favorite t-shirt—a t-shirt that reads, "I am a teacher!" This t-shirt and picture helps to remind him that everything he does is for the benefit and success of his students. He continues to share things that resonates with the t-shirt and his overall passion for the teaching profession. Towards the end of our conversation, he moves toward an area we never discussed---what goes on outside of the four walls of his classroom: the campus culture. I pose the question to him: "Is there anything else you would like to share regarding being a Black male, elementary teacher?" Lawrence pauses and says:

One thing that's on my mind is on my heart right now. Um, I wish there wouldn't be such of a feeling of judgment. Um, that has really been something that while my classroom, I do my own thing, you know, I run it the way I like to, but, um, outside these four walls, it

doesn't feel as comfortable. It does not feel as comfortable. Um, and I wish, you know, instead of talking about me, talk to me, um, yeah. Um, people, um, the lack of consideration, um, and what others can do. Um, I am viewed as some, or at least I feel like you shouldn't be doing that or that's wrong, or, um, adjust yourself.

Lawrence does not elaborate much on that partly because even though we meet after school, there are still teachers in the building, some of whom mill about outside of Lawrence's classroom. We hear a slight bump in the hallway at that time, and Lawrence goes from being comfortable sharing to visibly shaken. I can sense that he worries his co-workers overhear what he shares.

Our final interview quickly ends at that point, but the answer to that last question and the silence afterward provide me with even more insight into the way school culture can impact Black male elementary teachers. Lawrence is confident in the adaptations he makes to the curriculum, and the spice--as he coined it--he adds to teaching the curriculum. However, he is not ignorant to the thoughts of others concerning what he *should* be doing. And, as he noted, others did not talk to him, but talked *about* him. Despite a campus culture that emphasizes what he is perceived to be doing wrong, Lawrence still shows up each day driven by the seeds sown in him by his early years' teachers. More importantly, he is driven by the success and happiness of his students.

### **Description of Mike**

"I started looking around and wondering where all the Black male teachers were," Mike Jones, referred to as Mike from here on out, shares this with me during our initial interview, and with his students during one of our observations. Although I had been to his class three times before for formal observations, this is the first time he introduces me to his students. The

students finished state testing, and he gives them some down time to relax which allows me to move out of my typical observer role, and engage with his students. This is his “homeroom.” Even though he teaches sixth grade in an elementary school, the students rotate classes. Actually, due to the pandemic, the teachers rotate classes and students stay in one classroom. For the majority of my visits, I observe his afternoon Language Arts classes. During that time, He is in another teacher’s classroom so I do not get to see how he organizes his classroom. In this instance, he is in his own classroom, which includes small libraries at every corner. Another unique aspect of the teacher rotation for sixth grade is that all three teachers on his team are male. Mike is the only Black male teacher.

Okay. But I'm currently working with an incredible team. Who's very supportive. And one of the things that keeps coming out is that we all have special little talents that the others don't possess and that we can share those talents and it helps the team to move. And we have created an atmosphere with these sixth graders here in how we have bonded that the students are performing better than ever. This school is being represented by the students performing in a way that they've never performed before. And although we don't take total credit for that, we think the fifth grade teachers did a great job with them. We think administrators and others have too. We think the effectiveness of us bonding as male teachers. Again, rarely do you see three. Yes. Ma'am three male, sixth grade teachers. And we really believe that has an effect on students (Mike).

This statement from Mike resonates with me because I witness through my observations how they depend on each other and utilize each other’s talents. For example, during our interview another teacher comes into his room periodically to work on student iPads or other technology-related tasks. During class, they enter each other’s classroom from time to time to help. They all

seem at ease with each other, and as Mike mentioned, they had the patience to allow each other's talents and gifts to flourish on their own.

As he introduces me to his homeroom class, he shares my role in the district in which I work and why I was there. He reminds them of the previous month's (February) lessons: "Mrs. Campbell is working on her doctorate. And she's like some of the people we discussed." He then gives them the opportunity to share some of the things they learned during Black History Month.

"Remember Carter G. Woodson?" Mike asks.

"Yes! He's one of the people who wanted Black people to get an education," a student replies.

As class continues, he allows the students to ask questions of me. One student asks why I pursued a doctorate in education. I tell the students that much of Woodson's work inspires me. I start to tell them that Dr. Woodson was the second African-American to earn a doctorate from Harvard, but another student who shared that same fact interrupts me. While I am surprised by the vast amount of knowledge on Black history students were able to display on the spot, I was not surprised that they had that knowledge. Mike lets me know that to him Black history was the null curriculum, and it is something with which he would provide his students.

I love the fact that the district kind of provides the curriculum and within that curriculum, [Mike] is going to find his way to include the black...I don't want to call it the Black agenda, but the Black perspective and, one of the ways, a couple of ways come to mind, but the first one is poetry, and how I use Black poets in the curriculum (Mike).

Mike found creative ways to include Black history into the operational curriculum, and through our conversations I learn that this inclusion of Black history related to the way he cares for his

students. The students acknowledge the care by showing genuine interest in Black history. As I stand in front of Mike's class, I feel the genuine interest they had in what I was doing.

"Why did you choose to get your doctorate?" (Student 4).

"What do you plan to do with your doctorate?" (Student 5).

"I want to be a teacher too!" (Student 6).

Those were some of the questions that students bounced around the classroom. Their thirst for knowledge and connection was obvious. Students who looked like me and students who looked nothing like me sat intrigued by what I shared. As I conclude, Mike shares how important the work of educational researchers is, and thanks me: "Thank you, Mrs. Campbell. Thank you very much for sharing this with them."

### **Intentions of Care**

"I want you to be able to say in [Mr. Jones], I had a teacher that really cared about me."

—Mike

As mentioned before, Mike's inclusion of Black history was one way that he shows care for his students. The students display that they received the care by not only remembering the lessons he shared with them, but also by sharing it with others. Mike does not share this with me, but his inclusion of Black history had the ability to reach more than just the students in his classroom, but to reach all of those with whom those students shared the information.

One other way Mike exhibits care within his classroom was through respect and pacing. As I sit in Mike's classroom week after week, I notice that during independent work time students approach him with questions. It was not just one or two students, but the majority of students. While this may rattle even the most patient teacher, Mike meets each student with respect by listening to their concerns and looking directly at them when talking. As I think back



to my prior teaching experience in seventh grade Language Arts, I recall a different experience. Most students called out, “Miss! Miss! I need help!” They did this rather than engaging respectfully with me. I wondered what led to the difference in response. I wondered if it was because I am a woman and Mike is a man. I quickly ruled that out because I saw students in the other sixth grade classrooms behaving in a similar manner to what they did in my classroom. However, I think back to Mike’s own words. Even at fifty-four years old, he is able to connect with students:

Nothing's hard about it. Kids listen to me. I know how to interact with kids in a respectful or responsible way. And so all of those light bulbs started to turn on. And, then one other thing for me that was confirmation: As I went around, passing out the work, whatever the teacher had left to assign each one of those kids said, ‘thank you.’ And that blew me away to see the manners of the kids (Mike).

This occurred when Mike first started substitute teaching after leaving a career as a juvenile probation officer and a truck driver---both of which he worked for eleven years. Mike also adds that he enjoyed the diversity of his students. The campus includes students from the United States as well as, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and South America. Instead of talking at his students, he listens to them and let their thoughts, fears, hopes, and interests guide his instruction. This act of care leads to them acknowledging that they received his care by saying a simple “thank you.”

Mike shares more about his intentions of care, and part of the motivation behind it is due to his race and gender. As mentioned previously, he entered the teaching profession because he saw a lack of Black male teachers:

It's just so important, I think. And that's what I want these kids to see: that image of a strong black male in here. And, and one way, one other thing that kind of makes me effective is that I'm transparent with the kids. When I don't know something, I don't say I know something when I didn't know (Mike).

Mike expresses his desire for his students to take what they experience in his classroom and share it with others. “I think that would inspire them to give back some kind of way. I would think that that's part of my motivation too, for them to somewhat emulate what they've seen to somewhat imitate what they have seen in a teacher” (Mike).

Providing those experiences is what guides him in his teaching. He recalls his own childhood experiences, and shared that trying new things impacted him.

And so, so those experiences are, are kind of what I remember most. And then I just also remember, let me see before I get ahead of myself, but just one particular experience. And I've shared it with these kids. Then they exposed us to different things. And, and, uh, one thing I've never forgotten is an exposure to blue cheese. And my fourth or fifth grade teacher told us she's going to bring us some blue cheese. And Mr. [Jones] being a young Black person that never heard of blue cheese---never saw it, nor tasted it. And she had us curious for about a week and when she brought it in, she brought it with some nice crackers with it and kind of let us share that experience. And I'll just never forget that that was a new experience that a teacher introduced me to. And I never, my parents never bought any blue cheese. And again, it just had a lasting impression that she allowed us to get outside the box of Black culture (Mike).

Mike's elementary school experience with Ms. Smith inspired him to provide new learning experiences for his students. One day while I observe his class, he points out the garden

near his classroom. He tells me about how one day he went to Wal-Mart and bought kites for each student in his homeroom class, and they flew kites near the garden. He relays many of them had never flown kites before. He then points to each student and shares their reactions to flying the kites. Some kids were elated, others frustrated, and one student, a very serious, studious pupil, chose to read a book instead. I hear the concern for the student in his voice as he says, “his mom is really, really strict. He spends most of his time reading during free time and recess.” Although this student did not participate, and in a way did not acknowledge Mike’s care in that instance, it was evident in other ways. For example, this student was one of the students who soaked up the information on Carter G. Woodson and other notable figures in Black history-- figures that Mike shared with his class. This student was able to share that information when I came into the class.

These intentions of care come through for Mike because of not only how he cares for students, but also why he cares for them. He notes a spiritual power in all aspects of teaching, not only where he is now, but also how he got here. His relationship with God is of the utmost importance to him. His caring relationship with his students mirrors that, and throughout our conversations a recurring theme is that teaching is part of his ministry. His devotion to his students mirrors his devotion to his family, which includes his wife of thirty years, two sons who attended college, and his three-year-old granddaughter. This work guides him, but Mike is not ruffled by not knowing something. In fact, he uses his perceived limitations in education as tools for growth. The impact of this mindset on his art is evident.

## Capturing Curriculum

Another thing that's bad about elementary is that we don't really do vertical planning. In other words, when I'm planning, reading, I don't have any other reading teachers to plan with.

—Mike

Upon entering Mike's classroom, the curriculum he uses comes to life. While Mike may not manipulate curriculum materials, instead choosing to use it as a guide for his teaching, the material seems to complement his conversational style of teaching. Students are well versed in providing text evidence as support for their opinions. Even though Mike teaches a diverse set of learners including many students whose first language is not English and those who receive special education services, he treats his students as English scholars. He requires them to look for the answers within the texts they read and work together. His students sit at tables of five or six instead of in desks. Furthermore, his virtual students are on his laptop, but it is not uncommon for a student to come grab the laptop to bring those students into the conversation. While he has materials students can choose to read on their own, he encourages what Givens (2021) identified as communal literacy. Communal literacy is one of the ways Mike brings his values to the classroom as he values working together and appreciates the contributions of the sixth grade teachers on his team. He places the same emphasis in his own classroom. "Literacy was never primarily an individualized, antisocial endeavor in the context of black life; it was largely a social act at the center of black political struggle" (Givens, 2021, p. 39). Communal literacy is one of the ways in which he brings his culture and identity to his work. Although not his own project, Mike embraced the book club project provided by his school district. His campus was one selected to receive a grant to hold a curricular book club around Jason Reynolds's young adult fiction novel, *Ghost*. The aim of this book club was to change the direction of teaching, and

for students to engage more with the teaching materials. Students received manipulatives related to the book. While these materials provided to students by the grant did enhance their experience with the book, Mike's use of curriculum laid the foundation for their experience. Students were already familiar with engaging with the texts; in fact, Mike had been doing book club style teaching before the project began.

As mentioned earlier, Mike infuses Black history into his operational curriculum. While the explicit and intentional curriculum largely ignores Black history, with the exception of Black History Month, Mike takes that part of the null curriculum and makes it part of what they learn. Even during Black History Month, his colleagues do not go to the same lengths, Mike does. He makes sure to incorporate one activity, reading passage, or poem related to Black History for each day of the month. They learned biographical information for a minimum of three famous African Americans each day. The way students display their knowledge shows how Mike's art of teaching blends curricular considerations and his intentions of care.

***Mike's Art of Teaching: It Has Always Been Elementary***

Now you know Mr. Jones doesn't always know if you guys don't get it. So you gotta tell Mr. Jones.

—Mike

The preceding quote reflects Mike's teaching style. Instead of appearing as the expert in any subject, including his students' learning styles, he implores them to teach him. This style of teaching is more fluid, and Mike notes that while he uses the curriculum provided, his teaching style is one that fosters dialogue and conversation instead of just lecture and work. This could be because of the grade level Mike teaches. Sixth grade is a grade level that can exist in many different types of learning environments. At times, sixth grade is in elementary schools, other

times, in middle school, and in some instances in intermediate schools. In this particular district, sixth grade is placed in an elementary school--something Mike prefers.

And so I found my niche in fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. Right. And so, uh, as I started to look for other positions, I looked for positions that were in elementary schools because I dealt with sixth grade in middle school. I see what that's like. I wanted another district outside of Dallas because I had pretty much been assured that pretty much all the schools in Dallas with exception of small ones, they're all going to be like this. And so I decided I would leave the district, put my application out with Wylie, with Plano, Richardson, with Sachse and maybe a couple of other districts. And I didn't get a lot of interviews. I got about three interviews. And one of the things about teaching this subject is that I have a gen ed degree , but I'm not, ELAR, I'm not, um, I'm not certified in ESL. And most schools require you to be certified in ESL, especially to teach reading....I think having said that, it, it kind of reminds me that again, I think the fit for me has always been elementary (Mike).

***“So You Gotta Tell Mr. Jones.”***

“Alright guys, in this book, the character went through a hard time. I’m sure you guys can relate to going through a hard time, or having something happen and you don’t know what to do,” Mike addresses his class. At this time, the class begins to pack up their things. One student comes up to Mike. I cannot make out what the students says, but Mike’s expression goes from goes from excitement to concern.

“Well, you are strong. And you don’t let that weigh you down. You’re gonna be okay. Okay?” Mike says to the student. The student gathers his things, and Mike heads back to me with a worried look on his face: “I wish he wouldn’t have told me. Now I gotta go report it, and talk

to the counselor.” Mike does not share with me what the student said to him, but I see that he is overcome with worry and grief. I attempt to reassure him that the student would not have come to him if he did not trust him. “I guess you’re right,” Mike laments. As Mike and I walk down the hall, he reluctantly heads into the counseling office to gain some insight into his next steps.

“He is teaching the right age. These students need him,” I think to myself.

Even though he prefers elementary school, Mike also mentions how his more fluid, conversational style of teaching is at odds with the organizational flow of the school. He shares this with me:

I don't know that it's necessarily specific for elementary school and that is just the pressure of the curriculum pushing forward with the curriculum. Okay. And the, what we call the pacing. Okay. Mr. Jones has never been good at pacing. I've never been good at pacing and never really know how long each activity takes. And therefore, every day it seems like I don't get finished with something and my emotions are kind of tied to my lessons and my success (Mike).

While he understands how and why the systems in place work, he expresses a sense of frustration at his art being interrupted. Mike’s reasons for frustration appear to center on his own emotions at first, but he later reveals a desire to serve his students. He notes that he teaches the most students receiving English Language Learner (ELL/ESL) services and the most receiving Special Education (SPED) services. He wants to serve those students within his classroom as he sees best, but also struggles when they are pulled out from his class for various interventions and assessments. “...if you got 11 or 12 of them, you might as well as the whole class do it because you can't move forward. And that messes with my mind to the point that I really don't know how

to proceed,” Mike shares. So again, this frustration comes about because of a lack of understanding or guidance about how to move forward.

Mike notes the importance of strong leadership in helping him to move forward. Just being his class, I see how intently and intensely he devotes his time to developing strong students, and how he places other, administrative tasks to the side. He organizes his classroom in a way that is conducive to student learning, and although he states that he does not put in a lot of time in classroom decor, the decorations he does have seem to capture student interest. His classroom décor includes bright colors and motivational phrases. Outside of his classroom, he has a large, horizontal banner that includes all of the countries who students called home, or their parents called home before coming to the United States.

However, Mike benefits from being part of a team, and feels as though the campus culture does not foster communal learning for teachers. He has a strong teaching team, but laments on that being the only exposure he has to good teaching.

I don't know that one is a little tough, but I think about the teachers I work with who, none of us really know each other's story and they don't know much about who I am and what I do, but they see me running around this building all day long. I walk extremely fast. And so I'm moving on. I'm always on the go. And I always look like I'm running late because I am. But, they get to see this teacher and they're developing a little respect for me, but I don't get to know them and trying to answer the question, the worst thing about it. I don't get to know any of those other teachers that much and what they do, because again, I'm kind of stuck in my whole year with my team. When I do get to go into another teacher's room and I see good teaching, or I see good things on the wall, it blows my



mind because I'm a fan of good teaching. I'm a fan of well decorated rooms. Right. And so that's one of the tough things (Mike).

While other participants may isolate themselves in order to protect themselves from stereotyping, microaggressions, or for other reasons, Mike's devotion to his craft makes him want to engage with his campus professional community. Mike wants to be able to share his teaching methods, curricular considerations, and learn from others. As Mike has worked on multiple campus types (elementary, middle, and high school), he brings up an interesting belief by attributing this as an elementary school characteristic: the culture of an elementary campus may not lend itself to professional collaboration.

### **Mike's Lens**

Uh, one thing I think I forgot to mention is I really love recess. I love recess for the kids, not just so I can have the break, but I love how it gives those kids a break, watching them play, watching the kids play and enjoy themselves and interact.

—Mike

Mike was the only participant whose pictures gave me a clear understanding of who he is outside of teaching, and then I was able to see how that reflects in his identity as a Black male teacher. Mike's photographs have a theme of self-care as they were all about things he loved or things he loved doing. He shares his "recess" with me through his photos. One picture that really excites him was that of his \$200 boat. Mike describes himself as not wanting to spend a lot of money on the things that he enjoys. He finds great joy in finding things that are, as he described, cheap. He relays how he had been looking for a boat, but saw that most boats started at around \$1500. Even though he had the money to spend, he did not want to put all that money into a boat. He found a listing for a boat that because there was something wrong with it, the seller listed it at \$200. Mike went to check out the boat, and found that it in fact was something he could easily

fix. Before this meeting, Mike mentioned the possibility of getting a \$200 boat before. When I see the photo of the army green boat hitched to the back of his SUV, I know he found a way to make it work.

Some of the other photos he shares show aspects of self-care. Not only does he care for the garden at his school, but he has an extensive garden at home too. He finds himself spending a lot of time there. He also shares pictures of fish he caught, horseback riding, his grill and smoker, and other pictures of activities he does outdoors. Some of the other pictures he shares show his interest in art and advocacy, particularly his commitment to voting and politics. One particular picture he shares showed the graffiti artwork local artists created in downtown Dallas of George Floyd. The next photograph he took was of similar artwork, but this time the pictures were of local Black persons who had been shot and killed by police: Atatiana Jefferson of Fort Worth, Jordan Edwards of Balch Springs, and Botham Jean of Dallas. While we do not talk too in depth about these pictures, including these photographs shows that he was affected by their deaths and the artwork created around their deaths. He does not only concern himself with Black history, but also what affects Black people today. This concern is not only for his Black students, but also for him personally.

His final picture is of his previous school's classroom door. It features black bulletin paper with a yellow border. On the black paper are three posters. One of the posters has a Black background with various phrases in yellow, red, and green, like "you are special," and "you are important." Below it is a poster, also with a black background, that reads, "Everyone is welcome here. Everyone belongs here." Next to that poster is one in the shape of a circle. This particular poster features the Earth with children standing around it. Aside from the inclusive messages on his door, the colors Mike chose to decorate his door represent the African diaspora. He shows

students he cares and that they could be themselves in his class, and shares part of who he is with them.

Mike's photographs connects the dots of who he is as a teacher. His photographs of the door at his old school mesh his interest in preserving Black history and his intentions of care. The colors he choose let his students know what was important to him

### **Description of Sir Wesley**

My first encounter with Sir Wesley, from here on out referred to as Wesley, is completely one-sided and virtual, as I saw a video of him displayed in the hallway of the building in which I worked. He was a STAR teacher the previous school year, but due to the pandemic I only learn of the award winners during the current school year. From that brief video, I learn that he is not only an outdoor learning enthusiast, but that he facilitates the garden club on his campus.

One of the things that stands out about Wesley is that he is a teacher, but not in a role specifically titled teacher. He is in a unique role that only four elementary campuses have as they are part of a multimillion dollar grant program. His role is student culture coach—a role that did not appear to match the title. At each of the four campuses, the role looks different, but for Wesley, he pulls small groups of students and does reading and math interventions with them. In addition, he provides large group interventions with older students at his school. The types of interventions do vary, for example, with the older students, his interventions seem to be more social and emotional, as he tries to build in activities that get him interested in school. His podcast project for sixth grade students seems to be one intervention that helps students that engage with reading, technology, and ultimately school.

The other thing that stands out to me is his love of sports, and his early work experience was in athletics at the professional level, and then as a junior high and high school coach in the

district. Now he works exclusively with elementary students and does not coach. However, he typically held a physical education teaching position at elementary schools when he coached before giving up coaching altogether. Although it would appear that he got into teaching because of the opportunity to coach, Wesley always had the desire to make an impact on students' lives at an early age because of his own childhood experiences.

I want people to know that men do want to teach the little kids. I did not see a black male teacher until I was in junior high so I wanted to teach elementary so that kids can see a man who looks just like them. That's what led me here. I did not have many teachers who motivated me because most of the teachers I saw had the notion that black boys were not going to turn out to be anything but trouble makers. Matter of fact, I had a teacher tell me that in my elementary years so that was my motivation. Prove all of the naysayers wrong. As educators, we play an important role in the battle against systemic racism, inequity, and injustice. And we know how difficult it can be to navigate these crucial issues and talk about them with our students in the most impactful, sensitive way (Wesley).

Wesley tells me that that particular incident with his teacher occurred when he was in second grade. Additionally, his experience as a student-athlete and coach changed his view of students and sports, especially how Black boys perceive sports.

And how I feel about athletics now is completely different to what it was when I was younger. To me, I see athletics as a form of slavery in a sense. Slavery is a serious subject so I'm Sorry for using that harsh word. The parallels are alike however. You are just a piece of property. You are entertainment and nothing else. Modern day gladiators. Only now, the difference is that you are getting paid more. They will do whatever they can to keep you eligible/healthy in order to perform. When your eligibility is up or if you are

injured, it's hard pressed to get them to help with your transition into the working world. From experience, I've seen how hard it is to transition from playing sports your entire life to starting a career. So yeah, I'm like, I'm not going to do that. We have to expose our kids to all career opportunities. Entertainment is pushed the majority of the time depending on where you live. As The Notorious B.I.G would say. "Because the streets is a short stop / either you're slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot." As a kid, all that I wanted to be was a professional athlete and nothing else. I rarely thought about having a backup plan. I was determined to make it and be able to take care of my family one day. On my campus, several students tell me "I'm going to be a professional sports player." There is nothing wrong with that, however, playing at the professional level is extremely hard and rare. Only a small percentage of student athletes make it to that level.

We have to be realistic. What will you do for the rest of your life? (Wesley).

Wesley's childhood experiences serve as the foundation for his intentions of care. He expresses that to me in our interview, but when I walk around the campus with him, as he was often retrieves students or returns students to their classrooms, I could see how his intentions of care come out in different ways and are acknowledged by students.

### **Intentions of Care**

Wesley embodies what Kang (2006) describes as a Black feminist approach to care theory.

Due to the fact that many Blacks experience racism, oppression, and poverty, their perspectives and approaches have been presented differently from White feminists. Collins and hooks mention about how survival is one of the key issues for them; surviving in the community, society, and in the country where they live, and caring

cannot take place without considering this aspect. Black feminists' focus on survival does not limit to individual survival, but also group survival, and their ways of caring also developed along with this (Kang, 2006, p. 37-38).

A need to survive mark Wesley's own childhood experiences. Although he attended school in the district in which he now works, he experienced overt and covert racism in school which only added to the problems he faced at home. For him, school was not a safe space, and this is what motivates him to show up for students each day. Furthermore, he knows that having a Black male teacher in early grades can help to mitigate the effects of systemic racism in school.

Walking down the hallway with Wesley, I see the first evidence of the reciprocation of care and the theme of survival.

“Hey, you got any more blackberries or strawberries?” a student asks.

“No, but stop by my room. I’ve got some apples,” Wesley replies.

“I really liked those blackberries, man!” The student shouts.

Although not usually from the campus garden, Wesley provides his students with fresh fruit as a snack. While this would not necessarily seem like it is about survival, it is. He wants his students to understand what they eat and how it affects them. He wants them to understand their food choices, but also the choices that the school provides for them and how it affects them. While the majority of the campus is on free/reduced lunch, he wants his students to understand that they do have choices regarding what they eat at school. I saw this in how he guided students toward selecting topics for their podcasts.

I have one student who wanted to teach her peers how to cook because several students said that they didn’t like that cafeteria food that was served on our campus. I asked her, what do you want to do about it? What do you know about the district's food policy?

Where do they get the funding to provide food for the entire district and all campuses?

Do you know why the cafeteria serves the food that they serve? All I hear are complaints. Can you cook? If you don't like the food, why don't you come up with something and make it yourself. Do something about it. Why don't we work together with the school cafeteria and incorporate the food that students like. We have a garden, we have lots of seeds so we can actually plant and grow our own food. What do you want to plant? We have the resources so let's give it a try if you want (Wesley).

This type of empowerment and advocacy is common with Wesley, and recurs throughout our visits and our talks.

A lot of ideas and a lot of things that I've done, students came up with, I just want to be a voice for them. Students will not take risks, if the educators don't take risks. Teachers will not take risks, if leaders don't take risks. Everyone has the same basic needs so we have to work together. Let's make it to work (Wesley).

Student voice is something that Wesley strives to authenticate. Like other participants in this study, he recognizes the seeds he is sowing and is intentional about how he guides students because of it. Furthermore, Wesley does not hold himself as the expert. Instead, his students are the experts in what their needs and interests are, and so the curriculum becomes alive and ever changing.

### **Capturing Curriculum**

As mentioned previously, Wesley's curriculum is alive and changing. What initially started out as a podcast project for sixth grade students only, turned into a schoolwide endeavor. He obtained permission forms for sixth grade students to come after school and work on editing. Then his fifth grade students started coming after school to gear up for sixth grade. With his

fourth grade students, he approached the podcast differently. Since he works with fourth grade students and uses the campus garden as part of his curriculum, he limited their podcast topics to those surrounding the garden.

The fifth graders are doing the video edits because they want to be prepared for the podcast lessons in sixth grade. The fifth graders are teaching the fourth graders how to edit videos. At the same time, the fourth graders are providing videos to 5th grade working in the garden and keeping up with the garden maintenance. 4th grade's main project is garden prep and helping teach the primary grades garden lessons. So each grade level has a special project and we're just going to keep it that way. And that's what they love about it. They have the freedom to plan and create their own projects which has never happened before. I've helped them with their vision and put words to action. We created a 30 day plan and a 90 day plan and since I'm now in administration, it's a good chance that the principals will say yes because there is a plan of action (Wesley).

This is just one of the ways that Wesley indicates place-based concepts in teaching and learning. Place-Based learning (or community-based education) is often characterized by locality. The places where students live become the objects of study, and solving problems related to those environments becomes part of the curriculum. "Place-Based Education (or Community-Based Education), where the local community and environment serve as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. This approach diminishes the boundaries that have been built up between schools and the community. Place-Based Education emphasizes the ability of young people to learn by addressing the real-life problems around them" (Putnam, 2011, p. 57). Pushing through the boundaries is precisely what Wesley does day in and day out on his campus. While most



students choose to focus their podcasts around topics of interests to themselves, Wesley guides them toward a critical issue in the community. An innocuous comment about not liking cafeteria food turns into examining not only local food sources, but taking a critical look at what is being served and why. This resonates with what is known as critical pedagogy. While Freire coined the term critical pedagogy, its relationship to place-based learning is rather recent with Gruenewald (2003) first bringing this to life.

Gruenewald argues that teachers who practice place-based education must work with their students to investigate assumptions that inhibit their ability to live in ways that support the welfare of everyone and the health of local ecosystems. They must also learn to question and challenge perspectives that harm both their own lives and the lives of others through a process he refers to as ‘decolonisation’ (Smith, 2007, p.192).

Since there is no one on his campus whose job is like his, he has some freedom with the curriculum. This sense of isolation can be freeing, but also forces Wesley to rely on his students solely for curricular ideas. While there are curriculum materials in place that he does manipulate and utilize for small groups, he infuses place-based problem-solving activities and projects into the curriculum. While it might seem as though he plans vertically for the sake of time-management, the intentionality of his planning shows. For example, while all students have exposure to podcast development, he chunks the tasks so that they are developmentally appropriate. Even his pre-K students learn about some aspect of podcast creation. His intentional curriculum becomes actualized; it becomes the operational curriculum.

## **Wesley's Art of Teaching**

### ***Getting the Wiggles Out***

“Alright guys, let’s get the wiggles out today!” Wesley says as he walks over to the boom box in his classroom. Three boys tumble in, eager to select their tool for the warm-up.

Wesley calls out to them: “Okay, so, you can jump on the trampoline, use the punching bag, or Star Wars battle.” Two students immediately head towards the pool noodles to start the Star Wars battle, while another heads for the boxing gloves. As the upbeat, hip-hop music plays, Wesley quickly gets the materials ready for their lesson. He realizes a student is missing, and takes a moment to ask if anyone had seen him that day. Someone replies that he was not in class that morning. Wesley puts the absent student’s materials away.

Wesley takes the opportunity to bring all three students together. He encourages the student with the boxing gloves to join in, and shows him how to tap the other two boys. The students have fun trying to tap Wesley too. Afterward, his students come back together to start their lesson. None of the students complains about having to start the lesson. They settle into They focus their attention on the task. Although Wesley has changed the music some jazz-inspired beats and lowered the volume, the momentum from getting the wiggles out is still there.

### ***Inherited Practices with Intentionality***

From the moment I step into Wesley’s class, I see how inherited practices shape his teaching. Like others, he places an emphasis on movement and music. This is displayed as he completed his autophotography because instead of providing still shots, he also provides some short videos set to music. Those videos emphasize the fast-paced movement of his life. That fast pace was evident in everything Wesley does. He’s at carpool duty, lunch duty, picking up kids, dropping off kids, all while walking at a fast pace. In fact, his attire reflects his professionalism

with a sweater, corduroy pants, and comfortable, walking shoes. When students come to his class though, they find space to get the wiggles out and work at a slower pace.

From looking around the room, one can see the intentionality of his teaching with the items in his classroom. He has pool noodles, a small circular trampoline, a punching bag, and a boombox for music. As I wait for students to arrive week after week, I note the student artwork as well. When students arrive, he puts on a timer for students to “get the wiggles out.” Students have the option of jumping on the trampoline, punching the punching bag, or engaging in a Star Wars “battle.” Wesley sometimes joins in with the students, while other times he’s getting them ready to engage.

Afterwards, Wesley turns off the upbeat music, or turns it down and switches the music to a song of a slower tempo. This lets the students know that it is time to come back together and start the lesson. In regards to his literacy lessons, he provides frontloading before actually tackling the texts. For example, in one lesson he had students predict and examine vocabulary. Then the students read aloud alongside Wesley so that they can hear not only the correct pronunciation, but also hear the inflection in his voice to determine context. After reading it aloud, he has a brief discussion with them in which he guides them through a summary, and shares how they saw the vocabulary words show up in the text.

### **Sir Wesley’s Lens**

Wesley provides more than what we could discuss in our final interview. The first video he shows me is of a stream of water set to music. He captions it “Peaceful Peace.” The video is exactly that. The music he chose and the way he captured the water movement emphasizes peace. This is not the only video that includes a peaceful, serene nature scene. “Nature,” “Bike Ride,” “Peace,” & “Self-Care” emphasize nature and its healing aspects.

I'm going to be honest with you, I have a difficult time getting what I want to say out.

And honestly, thank you for this. This study actually gave me the opportunity to focus on exactly what I want to say and do it in very short, quick bites, because I can go; I can go and on about a particular subject. It's all about actions. I do not want to talk a good game, I actually want to do it. Actions, not words. So that's where I am. I'm going to use this platform to draw awareness to the issues that are present and relevant in everyday life. And this project gave me the opportunity, space, and place to express and share my thoughts and honestly, I feel totally free. That's the process (Wesley).

In our final interview, Wesley shares that no one told him what his job would be, so he developed it on his own. He also appears to do the same thing with his self-care. While one may look at his time with nature and his time spent exercising as his self-care, which is only part of it. In fact, his expression and creation of his self-care are what gives him this space to be free. Although he notes he has trouble getting out what he wants to say, his photographs and videos perfectly capture it.

Eisner (1998) notes the blurred distinction between curriculum and pedagogy. With Wesley those lines are blurred due to the nature of his unique position as the campus culture coach. As a connoisseur, I could see the ways in which he builds the campus culture, but at times it is almost as if he was not part of it due to his position and being one of the few Black men working in the school. He shares that even though there are other male teachers on campus, they do not have to make the same considerations as he does. He said even when he talks to them about it; they note that they do not consider those things. For example, Wesley keeps his door open when alone with any student, but especially female students. The other male teachers on his campus do not. His curriculum and teaching practices reflect the considerations he makes. The

video he titled “100 Years” features books that influence him personally and professionally. He also utilizes portions of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech throughout the video. “In education, one must be able one to sit and wait for evidence to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the fact from fiction. So what I’ve done is I cut up some parts of the speech, put it on some music, and that’s it” (Wesley). This choosing of the different books that impact him is not just limited to himself. He shares this with his students:

Books, all of the books that I’ve used for ‘100 years’ are the books that are posted outside of my classroom door. Those books are motivation for the students. I want them to see, like, look, this is what I’m on. This is what I’m reading right now. This is real life. Real life issues. Take some time out and read about your culture. Here’s some materials to look at it. It’s amazing to see students take an interest in reading the books that I’ve chosen (Wesley).

As my session with Wesley ends, I reflect on how his ability to create reflects not only through his autophotography, but also in everything he does. He does not need a lot of guidance. In fact, he thrives without guidance, something most people would not be able to achieve.

### **Description of Antonio**

Antonio is on the same campus, and even works down the hall from another participant, Mike. In fact, Antonio and Mike are not the only Black male educators on their campus, something that speaks to the positive culture of their campus. Both Antonio and Mike openly share with their coworkers about my study and their participation in it. Antonio’s classroom does not provide much privacy, and there are times where I wonder if other teachers can hear what he shares, to which he says, “I have nothing to hide from the people who work here.” Antonio does not state this defiantly, but rather comfortably. I, too, feel comfortable as I build connections with the three other women with whom he shares a classroom. In fact, one afternoon, we spend a

little more time on his interview than he planned, and one of his teaching roommates covers his tutoring until we finished so that other teachers would not be upset.

Antonio shares a classroom with three other teachers as mentioned, because he is a special education teacher who splits his team between supporting students in their regular education classes, and providing pull-out interventions with small groups throughout the day. His classroom is organized into four sections with dividers in certain areas, so that confidential information can be shared privately away from others. It is almost as if each of them have their own classroom within this large, enclosed space.

Much like the other participants in this study, his own childhood and elementary school experiences strongly affect his decision to become a teacher. Antonio's family moved from New Jersey to Illinois and then to the suburbs of Kansas City when he was a child. He attended a private Catholic school for his elementary school years, and his family was the only Black family in the entire school. Being the only Black family proved to be challenging for Antonio. The racism he experienced from his teachers was one thing, but he also experienced it from his peers and their families. He recalls a specific incident from third grade: "I had a parent and a peer tell me, okay. 'Black people had tanned and that's how you're Black.'" This experience still sits with Antonio today, and characterizes the exclusion.

Antonio was ahead of most of his peers throughout his elementary years, and skipped kindergarten. However, in first grade, his teacher refused to teach him how to read. Additionally, Antonio received special education services from kindergarten through college due to being legally blind. Despite not having the best elementary school experience, Antonio chooses to focus on the teachers who made the biggest impact on him, as "that's the kind of teacher I want

to be like” (Antonio). Those patient, loving, and encouraging teachers serve as models for him even today.

Identical to the other participant descriptions, this selection with Antonio begins with the intentional dimension, and then moves into the curricular and pedagogical dimensions. Finally, descriptions and interpretations of his autophotography conclude this section.

### **Intentions of Care**

When I first observed Antonio, I noticed that he spoke very softly to his students. He did not raise his voice at all to his students. Since Antonio is a resource teacher, his “class sizes” are often composed of two or three students. If one or two students is absent, or late, then he works one-on-one with students. He makes sure that each student has an individual white board from which to work. The white boards allow students to erase their mistakes and start over, something Antonio encourages them to do over and over. He models this by pausing when he senses a student struggling. He will then repeat slowly what he previously stated, or try to guide them through the process.

Antonio’s brand of care is consistent with what Noddings (2005) describes in relation to citizenship. Antonio takes time to determine what each student needs in order to be successful during their time together and in life. This is not something Antonio keeps to himself. In fact, he shares with them what he perceives their need to be. The students show that they received the care, by acknowledging it or continuing their work. For example, during one observation, I overhear him tell a student who is preoccupied by his younger brother in another quadrant of the classroom, “Remember, this is a separate classroom when this [board] is up. I don’t want you distracted by your brother.” The student lets out a sigh, looked at his brother quickly, and returns to work. The student cared about his brother and wants to make sure that his brother was on task.

However, Antonio realizes that in order for him to focus, he needs to acknowledge the student's care for his brother, but also prioritize the student's own learning for him.

Antonio's own childhood experiences with care also affect how he cares for his students. As mentioned earlier, his elementary school years were marred by teachers who did not advocate for him and refused to teach him. "Going through SPED as a child, I did not get anyone to advocate for me or teach me to advocate for myself until high school" (Antonio). If I close my eyes and imagine a young Antonio left to navigate this academic world where no one looked like him---peers or adults---who he had to learn what his needs were as a blind, gifted student and articulate those needs to others while facing rejection, I shudder. In his case, the system---rooted in white supremacy and ableism set him up for failure. There should have been legal ramifications for the educators who refused to teach him. However, I am reminded of the origin stories of early, postbellum Black educators who broke the law by teaching Black students.

Before Emancipation, the enslaved had to gain their education by "snatching learning in forbidden fields," as Woodson characterized it. The black abolitionist and teacher Francis Ellen Watkins Harper explained that some tried to 'steal a little from the book. And put words together, and learn by hook or crook.' Acquiring knowledge was a criminal act. As Frederick Douglass's master put it, a slave who learned to read and write against the will of his master was tantamount to "running away with himself." Stealing one's self in this way meant that the literate slave was a fugitive slave: to secretly acquire literacy---for religious, practical, and intellectual ends (or, perhaps, especially as leisurely activity)---was kin to black flight from the sites of their enslavement. (Givens, 2021, p. 27).

In this sense, whatever fears Antonio's White teachers, peers, and school community members had about his educational advancement harps back to the notion that Antonio could run away



with himself. He could become great. Fortunately, Antonio did become great, and he did not stop with just becoming great. In fact, he makes sure to take where his students are and build on top of it. “I want to take where you are and build on top of that.” He empowers his students to run away with themselves.

**Capturing Curriculum: “My Top Priority is my Caseload.”**

While Antonio is largely bound to the curriculum provided by the district, his priority is to his caseload of students. While this section does not cover his intentions of care specifically, there is some overlap between his different curricula. They are at odds with each other in Antonio’s classroom. The explicit curriculum does not allow for nuances and differentiation even though it is geared towards students receiving special education services. In consideration of his students, he developed a month-long at-home curriculum for fifth grade students struggling with mathematics, specifically certain concepts of multiplication. Additionally, this curriculum Antonio crafted allowed for parent involvement. In a modified, flipped classroom setting, Antonio provided the students with the tools necessary to explain the concepts to their parents. This allows for parents to work on the curriculum packet with the students at home. At school, Antonio devotes time to reviewing the curriculum to clear up any misunderstanding, and provide answers to questions students and their family members may have about the curriculum. This operational curriculum is far different from the explicit curriculum provided by the district. Instead, it mirrors the intended curriculum he had for his students.

In this situation, not only does Antonio place his own personal stamp on the curriculum provided, but also he strays from its intended use. The intended use of the curriculum is for it to be used in the classroom. However, Antonio has the foresight to see that by expanding its use to home, he has more impact. Furthermore, Antonio provides his students’ families with a way to

be involved with their students' learning through common language and practices. He not only empowers their families, but empowers students by giving them the tools to advocate for themselves.

School leaders often struggle with ways to involve students *and* their families as stakeholders in the education process. There are often assumptions about what families can and will do, especially in schools like the one Antonio and Mike serve. However, as difficult the task at hand was for Antonio, he finds a way to connect the learning to his families. In this way, the null curriculum---what was left out---becomes the operational curriculum. What was left out were families. Antonio allows for students and their families to bring to life the curriculum he created.

### **Antonio's Art of Teaching**

I joke about asking questions but I don't want to miss anything because their success is a victory for me.

—Antonio

Student success is the hallmark of Antonio's teaching practices. As seen with his curriculum decision-making, he thinks outside of the box in order to make sure his students are successful. He has the same approach for his pedagogy. Since he works with students in small groups and often one-on-one, he curates his teaching practices toward their individual needs. I pay attention to the different strategies he uses to communicate concepts related to math and reading.

### ***Teaching with Volume: "You Make Me Look Good!"***

I sit down at the small round table next to the larger round table that Antonio and his students use. Antonio speaks in a low, hushed tone. Across the room, I see and hear two other

teachers engage with students. Despite the background noise, it is easy for me to focus in on Antonio and his student. As Antonio approaches the lesson on volume, the tension between him and the student continues to grow.

“We’re going to go through operations and the formula for figuring out volume,” Antonio says as he begins to write on the small whiteboard. The student hangs his head low. Antonio tries to get him to answer the questions he poses, but the student halfheartedly guesses Antonio recognizes the student’s non-verbal expressions of confusion. At that point, Antonio stops the lesson and starts over again. This time he draws a square. He and the student build on the formula using visuals. Antonio’s quick adaptation seems to do the trick, as the student progresses through the lesson easily with Antonio’s guidance.

In this same lesson, I see how Antonio uses praise as a motivational tool for learning. While Antonio does talk in a low, quiet voice, he is not afraid to show his excitement for his student’s success. While the student works on the volume lesson and even after, Antonio praises him: “Good job!” “Excellent!” At the end, he tells him, “You make me look good!”

### ***Partner in Learning***

This comment solidifies the collaborative nature of teaching and learning. Antonio’s teaching reflects that he is in the learning with his students. As much as he instructs them, he also learns with them and is ready to support them if they stumble. Instead of positioning himself as the facilitator of learning, Antonio positions himself as a partner with his students.

### **Antonio’s Lens**

Black male teachers are the most undervalued asset in elementary schools.

—Antonio

I rely on Antonio's words mostly for this part of the data collection process. Antonio decides not to take and submit photographs because he feels as though he "represents something bigger than myself. The results and aim of my teaching approach are rooted in promoting others. I am not looking for recognition, just impact and results" (Antonio). Instead of taking pictures, Antonio selects images that resonate with him, and he provides a caption and brief write-up for each image. These images and their accompanying write-ups add context to the discriminating experiences he had as a child, and now as a Black man teaching in an elementary school. Even more so, they add another layer to his experience---one that adds insight to his experience as a student with special needs. One picture has the letters T, D, and L. Next to those letters is the phrase, "Transforming the Disabled Life." He captions the photo "TDL," and provides this explanation for the photo:

As a special education teacher, and having grown up as a special needs student, I have personal and now professional insight of the building blocks needed for scholars to become successful. One of the key areas is overcoming or transforming the idea of being disabled as something negative and making it positive. A dis=ability is a superpower. It gives you access to tools that help you learn and grow. Further, it teaches discipline, work ethic, and advocacy for self and others (Antonio).

This reiterates his desire to equip students with the tools they need to be successful both in the classroom and in the real world. It also helps to understand the frustration he has with feeling undervalued even though he is an asset to schools. While this feeling is not necessarily due to the staff on his campus, it is due to experiences trying to secure a teaching job. He shares the comments he is met with when people learn he is a teacher: "Oh, you're a teacher? What do you coach?" In addition, when he received his teaching certificates, others told him that he needed to

add on a physical education endorsement because “all male teachers are P.E. teachers.” While he understands the allure of coaching, he notes that the only reason that he would consider doing it is to supplement his income, as the pay for teachers is not adequate, especially for men who are often the sole or majority income providers for their families.

Another source of frustration for Antonio is the campus culture. He emphasizes that it is not his campus culture, but how campuses are towards Black male teachers. As mentioned previously, his caseload is his top priority. One image he shares is of two people on a mountain with one helping the other up the mountain. He titles it “Servanthood,” and shares that he made a decision to live his life around being a servant. “The decision has kept me humble and confident; has led a thirst to grow in many areas; allows me to focus and build upon what has been accomplished; and accept new ideas and strategies” (Antonio). With this as his focus, he laments that campus administration can get in the way. “We don’t want to deal with a lot of B.S” (Antonio). He also notes that there needs to be a push for Black male educators so that they can be more comfortable in a female dominated job field. This revelation from Antonio causes me to consider what practices on campuses are rooted in the idea that education is a “female career.”

Much of the focus of this study has been on practices rooted in Black history, but the intersection of the participants’ gender and race provide a unique perspective. Even though Antonio may not feel fully comfortable as a Black male elementary teacher in his school district, his desire to advocate for students in the ways he needed as a child allows him to continually show up for students.

### **Low Lighting**

As I place the cover over the lens on these four vignettes, it does not mean these four stories cease to be told. Even more so, I revisit the stories to provide further interpretation in

chapter five. Additionally, I illuminate the themes that emerged and my analysis of them that came about from their words, teaching, materials, and photographs. One idea became obvious as I worked to construct this chapter. I found it difficult to separate the curriculum from the pedagogy. As I wrote, I found myself questioning if I was writing about curriculum, instruction, both or none of it. Eisner (1998) points out that the distinction between curriculum and teaching is artificial. Instead of focusing on placing my own distinctions between the two, I focused more on how they occurred organically in these men's classrooms, and how they negotiated curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, this chapter reiterates, "the signature that individual teachers give their work" (Eisner, 1998, p.79). As an educational connoisseur, I draw out and highlight those signatures, whereas in this next chapter, I blur the lines to illuminate commonalities.

## CHAPTER V

### THEMATICS, EVALUATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Introduction to the Section**

The previous chapter provided me with the opportunity to describe and interpret the participants, their teaching practices and curricular decision-making. Additionally, I shared descriptions and interpretations of their autophotography selections. I began the process of writing chapter four by journaling immediately after each observation. From those notes, and notes from our interviews, I began the coding process. I simultaneously began to craft chapter four which led me to organize it the way I did: each participant received his own section which included an introduction, focus on teaching, focus on curriculum, and focus on autophotography. In this chapter that examines themes, evaluations, and implications, I organized it primarily around the themes that arose during coding. Instead of devoting a section to each theme, I organized this chapter based on the research questions. Within the answers to those questions, the themes associated with the questions are nestled within the sections.

From there, I move onto curriculum in more detail, and share how the participants mediated the existing district-provided curriculum to provide a more responsive curriculum—a restored curriculum. I explain the reason for branding this curriculum with this nomenclature. Lastly, I end with a reflection on critical race theory as it applies to the present study. Currently, there is a significant amount of controversy surrounding critical race theory, and just recently, a house bill in the state where this study was conducted passed which will limit the way educators

can teach about racism. I share the implications for how this bill would affect future studies of this nature and the teaching practice of the participants.

### **Overview of the Study**

Black male educators account for roughly two percent of the teaching population nationwide (Strauss, 2015; Walker et al., 2019). This is largely due to recruiting efforts that do not adequately aim to find and retain Black male teachers (Bell, 2017). One participant from Bell's (2017) qualitative study on the interviewing process of Black male teachers notes the feelings of insecurity that Black men often feel when interviewing.

Perhaps my interviewing skills were poor.... Yet I had met current teachers.

Some weren't as impressive as I was! They were teaching—what was wrong with me? I began to measure my skills against them all. Sometimes I won.

[Laughs.] Was I held to a different standard? Was race and/or gender a factor?

Interviewing became a game. When I would submit my resume, within days interviews were arranged. I felt that I received so many interviews based on my published resume. I looked good on paper! It got to the point that I turned down some interviews. I did not see the point in playing the interview game (Bell, 2017, p.1145).

Overt racism hinders the recruitment and retention of Black male teachers and contributes to stereotypes attributed to the Black race. During our conversation, Antonio suggested that retaining Black teachers is an issue. However, he did not provide insight into a specific reason for the difficulties in recruiting Black men. The truth is there are a myriad of reasons that one could attribute to Black men leaving the teaching field that mirror why non-Black men leave teaching. Those include negative encounters both within and outside their work environments



and dysfunctional administration (Bristol, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). The reasons that Black men leave teaching due to race-related reasons are of particular interest to me, especially since Black people leave the teaching profession at a higher rate than Whites in general (Bristol, 2015).

There are additional reasons that Black men leave the teaching profession that has to do with their race. Participants believed their interactions with colleagues paralleled the encounters their students of color had with adults in the building. Black male teachers also described having to serve, first, as police officers, rather than teachers. Instead of their colleagues coming to them for help designing engaging curriculum, Black male teachers became responsible for taking care of the “misbehaving” students (Bristol, 2015).

Black men are seen as mentors, role models, and disciplinarians rather than instructional and curricular leaders. (Borowski & Will, 2021). While it might seem innocuous to have Black males serve as role models in schools, Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010) highlight the homogenizing effects of this trend. By placing Black male teachers into this category, education stakeholders ignore the systemic issues that role modeling and mentorship cannot overcome. “...invoking Black male teachers as a basis for addressing the plight of Black boys in urban schools can lead to a focus on the idealization of teachers as role models. The result of this is a decided failure to give due consideration to the pedagogical requirements and resources needed to address the systemic and structural influences of racism and the economic disadvantage experienced by minority groups” (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010, p. 44). One of those systemic and structural influences of racism is the policing or disciplining of Black students. Black male teachers report that their colleagues often look to them to help with student discipline. This

shows up in different ways. For some teachers, they play an unofficial disciplinary role such as dean of students, while other teachers experience an influx of students sent to their classrooms throughout the school day (Bristol & Mentor, 2018).

Despite the current state of teaching and the low number of Black male teachers, early Black education in America after the Civil War included Black men. Their teaching practices, which focus on education as a means for not only upward mobility, but also survival, rested on the ideas that education was political and an act of resistance (Givens, 2021). Early schools were segregated, but Blacks had little control over their own schools (Givens, 2021; Woodson, 1933). Despite this, early postbellum teachers found ways to restore the curriculum they were forced to teach with what their students needed (Givens, 2021). The findings of this study show that the intentions of Black male elementary teachers mirror those of Black male teachers after slavery ended in the United States.

Unfortunately, this resolve did not alleviate all Black curricular problems moving forward. Many curriculums today fail to reflect positive Black images, themes, and values (Binder, 2011; Milner, 2016; Watkins, 1993). Furthermore, the pedagogical considerations of men, including Black men, in general are overlooked (Bristol, 2015; Mitchell, 2016). Black male teachers report spending a bulk of their time on discipline matters, and that when they try to offer suggestions related to teaching practice, they are ignored or brushed off by campus leadership and their teaching peers.

In Boston, the loner teachers felt frustration because colleagues often sought their help in dealing with student discipline issues, but rarely asked them for advice when it came to actual teaching. In other words, they were viewed as behavioral managers first, and teachers second, Bristol said. “Many of them felt their colleagues considered them

intellectually inferior,” he said. Rhone, for his part, shares stories of having his suggestions ignored or discounted by colleagues, pondering the motivations behind personnel decisions and perceived slights, and serving as a frequent sounding board for the concerns of black parents and students (Mitchell, 2016).

The nuanced actions towards Black male teachers makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly where the problem lies. Not being able to pinpoint the issue speaks to the larger systemic challenges in place that continue to keep Black men as subservient and feel inferior, even when they are supposedly called to bring up the students of color, especially Black students, with whom non-Black teachers cannot relate. This study sought to bring to light the curricular decision-making and pedagogical considerations of Black male elementary teachers. To do this I sought to answer three questions:

- Q1     What are the intentions of Black male teachers for their students?
- Q2     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?
- Q3     How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?

While this study did not address a specific problem explicitly, through reviewing research and data collection, I identified areas where Black male elementary teachers were overlooked despite being praised for their teaching. For example, one teacher was celebrated for his high scores on the state assessments, but was not identified as a grade level or content area leader. By illuminating these issues, I hope to improve the systems of education that are rooted in White supremacy.

I utilized the arts-based qualitative research method of Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism (Eisner, 1998). This methodology allowed me to focus on and discern nuance in the

teaching and curricular decision-making of Black male elementary teachers. In order to add another layer of arts-based methodology, and to include participants in data creation, I employed autophotography which required participants to take, select, and caption pictures related to their identity as Black male elementary teachers.

To begin this study, I used convenience and network sampling to recruit four Black male elementary teachers. Since both recruitment measures allowed me to capitalize on my connections within the Dallas-Fort Worth area, I was able to recruit four participants from the same district where I work. Even though each principal was aware of the study conducted on their campus, participants did not reveal their identity to the principal unless it was there choosing. I conducted this study in late February, March, and April of 2021. I met with each participant to conduct the initial semi-structured interviews and provide an overview of the autophotography component of the study. I used an interview schedule (see Appendix C) to guide me as I inquired about their own educational experiences, their intentions for student learning, and their beliefs about being Black male elementary teachers. I also discussed with them the autophotography overview and provided them with guidance (see Appendices D, H). Afterwards, I completed four thirty-minute observations of each participant teaching a lesson. I utilized an observation checklist to take notes (see Appendix G). I ended the data collection process with an unstructured follow-up interview (see Appendix E). During the follow-up interview I listened as participants shared their autophotography selections. I let the participants show me their pictures, and share the thought behind the captions. When I met with the participants for the initial interview, my prompts regarding the photo selection were to guide them in thinking about their identities as Black men and their intentions for their students. I encouraged them to journal, and to make lists of words, phrases, and people associated with

those identities and intentions. There was quite a bit of diversity in the photography selections and levels of captions. Some participants included photographs and captions, while others chose to use videos, or selected photographs from internet searches that aligned with their identity.

Once I completed the data collection process I set out to write the descriptions and interpretations of each participant. In chapter four, I addressed all three research questions by organizing the participants' descriptions and interpretations around pedagogy, curricular intentions, and their autophotography selections.

### **Discussion of Themes and Response to Research Questions**

In Chapter four, I described and interpreted the practices of Black male elementary teachers. I synthesized what I learned from observations, interviews, and photographs into vignettes that reflected the participants' intentions for student learning. Eisner's (1998) thought that "a teacher or a school district may endorse one kind of outcome, but in practice emphasize quite another. What occurs in practice may be far better than what the curriculum guide prescribes," guided me. I sought to explore in further detail how the intentional dimension of schooling interacts and informs the curricular and pedagogical dimensions of schooling (Eisner, 1998, p.73). In this chapter, I share the themes that grew out of the participants' responses regarding their intentions for learning, curricular decision-making and instructional practices.

Q1     What are the intentions of Black male elementary school teachers for their students?

Each participant in this study shared their intentions for their students. For all, care guided their intentions. The education process in their classrooms was not characterized by the transmission of knowledge from the participants to their students. Instead, the participants identified themselves in their students, and seemed to be with them on their educational journey.

The connection the teachers have to their students is largely influenced by their spirituality and desire to advocate for their students. For example, Antonio shared that he views himself as a servant leader, a characteristic he attributes to his faith in God. Mike shared that he felt called by God to be a teacher. Both displayed a strong desire to advocate for their students. Antonio shared that his was because of his experience attending school without an advocate, and Mike desired to advocate for students because of the lack of Black male advocates he witnessed while working as a corrections officer.

While still connected to the idea of care, as I wrote I felt compelled to separate pedagogical and curricular intentions from each other and from intentions of care. While these ideas largely overlap, each concept has influences in common, but also has influences that differ.

### **Intentions of Care**

The teacher's life is a double one. He stands in certain fear. He tends to be stilted, almost dishonest, veiling himself before those awful eyes. Not the eyes of Almighty God are so straight, so penetrating, so all-seeing as the wonder-swept eyes of youth.

W.E.B Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, 1920/2004

In this study, one theme that presented itself was the participants' intentions of care. In our interviews, each participant expressed the ways in which they cared for their students. It was during my observations of the participants that I saw these intentions in action, and I saw their students receive and acknowledge the care. While spirituality was not necessarily received by the student, the participants in this study acknowledged how spirituality affected their teaching. For some, their actual religion provided the intention of care. For all, it was about the impact being bigger than themselves. Mike elaborated on this:

I've been serving people, serving kids and, and I felt God was calling me back to do that. Somehow. Wasn't sure what the mission was, but I walked away from trucking. I said,

“I’m making good money.” It was stressing me a little bit, but I made the most money I ever made in my life. And, realizing a couple of days after I started to cry about it, I realized that wasn’t where God wanted me (Mike).

Lawrence did not directly mention God, but shares how he too was called to teaching.

I feel that I was called to this profession. Um, and I love children. Generally, I’m a person that I want to see people do better. I want them to grow. I want them to chase after whatever their heart desires. I remember I saw this poster that says the future belongs to the people who believe in the beauty of their dreams (Lawrence).

This connection to something bigger than themselves coincided with their desire to advocate for their students.

### *Spirituality*

Three of the four participants expressed how their religion or faith impacted their teaching. Both Mike and Wesley felt as though they would not be in the classroom teaching elementary students if it were not for their faith and belief in a higher power. Mike recalled a series of events beginning with him almost not being accepted into an alternative teacher certification program due to being one point shy of the grade point average requirement. However, he was able to complete the program and able to receive a scholarship at the end that wiped away the debt he accrued during the program. He attributed those events, and his joy in teaching and affecting the lives of others, to his faith in God.

They called it cohort something at that time they had been doing it really since the time.

And that’s another way God allowed me to look back and reflect because in 1991, when I left, Nope, not 91, 2001. When I left the juvenile department, they were starting these cohort programs, alternative certification, but, and I even considered at that time, but at

the time they were offering it, there was no pay with it. And there was no way I could transition into a program and not earning money, right. For my wife and family. And so, so, I was able to, uh, sign up for that program another way, God, let me know that, that, that I was destined to do this because they had a cutoff for the AC program that you had to have a certain GPA. And I hadn't been in college since 89, but my GPA fell about a half a point under that. And I had all my money. I had everything else going for me. And I talked to the lady over the program and she said, "we really like you. I'm going to let you in this program (Mike).

Wesley also shared aspects of his faith during our time together. Much like Mike, he attributed to God the joy he receives from teaching. He identified that his faith meant so much to him and his Bible is his main source of strength. "My faith means so much to me and the Bible is the source of all of my strength. The Bible is the reason why I included 'Love the Others' with the picture" (Wesley). He included a picture of his Bible and included the caption "Love the Others" along with it. Antonio shared that his faith guides him and helps him to be passionate and compassionate with others. He also expressed the decision to shape his life around being a servant. "This decision has kept me humble and confident. It has led to a thirst to grow in many areas, allows me to build upon what has been accomplished, and accept new ideas and strategies" (Antonio).

Noddings (2005) expresses the importance of looking to black Christianity for examples of ways that Black people created something beautiful out of oppression.

Religion is an important theme in black culture, too. Students should come to appreciate the genius of black people in creating black Christian churches out of a religion forced on them as slaves. What could have been a slave mentality became instead a wonderful force



of solidarity and liberation. Spirituals, poetry, novels, and biographies that describe black Christianity and its influence are plentiful (Noddings, 2005, p. 83).

With Christianity being an explicit influence on the lives of the participants, one can see how it influences their expressions of care and their teaching practices. Despite the oppressive forces within school systems, these teachers seek to stand in solidarity with their students and liberate them through education.

While religion or faith did not present itself in my conversation with Lawrence, he expressed beliefs consistent with his teaching being bigger than himself. In one conversation, he talked about running into his kindergarten teacher, and how seeing her allowed him to reflect on the impact he has on his young students, and where they might end up in life. “And it makes me think back to why I’m in this profession, how it’s so powerful to see students grow and develop and become what they’re destined to become in life. And that experience alone just really pushed me to continue to strive for better to know that I’m sowing seeds every day” (Lawrence).

### ***Advocacy***

One of the ways in which Black teachers care for their students is through advocacy. One can view this advocacy best through the lens of Black feminist care theory (Kang, 2006). It is also characterized by what political activist James Weldon Johnson described as *shared vulnerability* (Givens, 2021). Shared vulnerability is the idea that there is an understanding or vulnerability because of shared experiences with racism, especially in regards to advancing the education of Black students. “As a student, he witnessed the shared vulnerability of black people through the story of his teachers and family...The kinship and intertwined lineage between Woodson and his first teachers made him aware of their shared vulnerability as black people, a vulnerability that was bound up in the constraints placed on their educational strivings” (Givens,

2021, p. 34). This concept was most clearly personified in the expressed intentions of Antonio. The students I observed him with were young Black boys who receive special education services like he once did. Additionally, he shared during our interviews that his motivation for teaching was to advocate for students in the ways he needed and did not receive as a child. While most Black teachers today teach not only Black students, but students of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and abilities, they share the experience of an education in the United States rooted in White Supremacy and where Black literacy was a crime (Spring, 2013). So, this advocacy and desire to guide students through surviving and thriving presented itself in a variety of ways in Black male elementary educators.

Advocacy at first to me did not seem to coincide with Noddings's (2005) theory of care. However, each participant worked to make sure that students had what they needed to be successful outside of what the school and district deemed they needed to be successful. The district provided teachers with a curriculum to use. Housed on an electronic learning platform, the district utilized a variety of stakeholders including curriculum directors, curriculum specialists, academic facilitators, and campus-level instructional specialists to ensure that the curriculum is implemented with fidelity. Each participant found a way to incorporate critical skills the curriculum largely ignored. For example, Mike acknowledged that the curriculum includes text analysis. However, Mike went added more context to the curriculum because he wanted his students to move beyond just being able to answer questions on a state assessment. For him, his act of care included taking time out for those critical lessons and extending the curriculum.

And this may be a drawback of my teaching though, is because I dragged my lessons out.

I kind of let the kids almost steer where we're going. I think this writing assignment will

take 20 minutes. They took the whole class. I didn't realize that. But so the next day I got to make adjustments, but was I wrong for letting them take that extra time? (Mike).

Mike's statement about letting the students guide class progress, also coincides with another theme made present in relation to care: student voice. Noddings (2005) argues that in order to reform schools so that they center on care, a long list of actions need to occur. Included in her list is "involve students in governing their own classrooms and schools" (p.174). While some schools and teachers attempt to allow this through initiatives like student council, the teachers in this study enacted it within their classroom. Like Mike, Wesley also looked to his students when determining how to proceed with his teaching. Wesley's podcast was just one way he enacted student voice in his curriculum and instruction. Students indicated that they received his care not only by expressing their appreciation, but showing up during non-school hours to work on the project and by sharing what they learned with younger students. The students' actions affected how Wesley taught.

The connection between care, spirituality, and advocacy and how it presents itself in the teaching and curricular decision-making of the Black male teachers of today can best be identified by looking to the past. The person who exemplifies this connection and whose own intentions mirrors that of the participants is W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois used his social capital as a social sciences researcher, political activist, and the first Black man to earn a doctorate from Harvard to advance the educational plight of Black people. One of his most notable contributions, *The Souls of Black Folk*, provides readers with a view of how spirituality impacts Black people.

Merely a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro Problem, and the spiritual striving of the freedman's sons is the travail of souls whose

burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity. And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk" (Du Bois, 1903/2013, p. 11).

The burden Du Bois describes relates to the duty these participants have to care for and advocate for their students. Du Bois exhibited this through not only his writing, but also his advocacy in education. Along with Woodson, he conducted research that challenged the stereotypes and misconceptions around Black people (J.A. Banks, 2007). While the participants did not conduct research in the same manner that Du Bois and others did, they did correct misinformation regarding Black people, specifically Black men like themselves. They did this through representation. Mike shares how important it was for his students to see positive, accurate representations of Black men outside of athletics and acting.

I think it did in a sense that during the times that I grew up in school race was a big factor and we were empowered with confidence as black people, especially my parents, you know, they talked to us about being confident about who we are, but also being able to prove that we could compete with anyone else. And so at an early age, I developed the attitude of competing with other races to show as a representation of my race, that we're on the same day we can compete. And so that's been a driving force, all of my life showing it. And that's part of my desire being in elementary, because I know that they've not seen successful black elementary men outside of athletics and acting in that kind of thing...And it was just important for me to know that or to let others know that we could.

And again, just a representation of the race. I always felt I was representing the race in all that I do (Mike).

Again, Mike's words coincide with the sense of duty that the early Black curricularists displayed. A strong sense of spirituality, characterized by liberation from oppression and servant leadership shaped the intentions of care for these teachers. A sense of duty to advocate and represent their students and themselves accurately bound them.

### **Curricular and Pedagogical Intentions**

Student engagement influenced the instructional practices of the teachers in this study. Each of them acknowledged that even though the district provided curriculum came with some guidance on instructional practices, they were not enough to sustain student interest. This became especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic as participants struggled to find ways to engage students while remaining socially distant. Lawrence, a kindergarten teacher who relied on activities like circle time in which students come to sit on a rug at the front of the room to begin the day, found himself trying to find other ways to engage students.

I want to get them excited. I want them to decode things with, with passion, with intensity, you know, with intention rather than just, I'm gonna raise my hand, because if you don't try to add, like I learned, you know, as this year went by, especially with how my classroom is structured with, um, due to COVID. I learned that I need to bring some sort of zest to class (Lawrence).

### ***Communal Pedagogy***

Adding zest to the class can look different for teachers, even four Black male elementary school teachers. One commonality I witnessed was the inherited practice of communal pedagogy. I use the term "inherited practice" as defined by Givens (2021) which characterizes

them as teaching practices done out of necessity due to the fugitive nature of learning during slavery, and even after. Communal pedagogy, or in the case of enslaved Black people, communal literacy, allowed “a collective engagement in the learning process and [permitted] illiterate blacks to engage with the written word. This communal pedagogy was integral to black educational heritage since slavery. The early iterations of communal education were cultivated out of political necessity...” (p.123). Communal pedagogy seems at odds with many of the more progressive and current trends in education which tend to emphasize individualized and differentiated instruction (Givens, 2021). However, each of the participants utilized collective engagement despite there not being an identified political necessity. For example, Wesley utilized communal literacy practices in his small groups. Students chanted together as they read texts, and while they answered questions individually, they were encouraged to work together and share their knowledge in order to learn. Wesley did not focus on his students arriving on the right answer on their own, but rather finding ways to work together and arrive at an answer together.

The significance of communal pedagogy lies in its intentions, or the intentions of the early Black educators who utilized this practice. Collective advancement trumped individual success because there was safety and power in numbers. In order to challenge racism and oppression, Blacks needed as many people involved in the fugitive act of learning (Givens, 2021). Today, individualism largely dominates education systems. One can look on social media and find news stories on individual Black student success, but struggle to find articles about large groups of Black student success. Even outside of Black students, one can look to how society celebrates prestigious honors such as National Merit scholarship. School districts report their recipients, and share stories of the individual’s hard work toward the achievement, but there are

no stories on how students worked together to achieve this goal. Even teachers have trouble incorporating cooperative learning strategies. That is because, strategies like cooperative learning and communal learning cannot be successful without an investigation into the inequitable history of America.

The implementation of strategies such as cooperative learning and culturally relevant instruction within the context of existing assumptions and institutional structures will not result in equity pedagogy. Its implementation requires that current assumptions about teaching, students, learning, and the nature of U.S. society held by most teachers be interrogated and reconstructed (C.A.M. Banks, 2007, p. 92).

The Black male educators in this study attempted to implement culturally relevant instruction despite not being able to reconstruct the school systems where they educate. Even though it may seem as though they have an impossible task, they appear to be doing something that comes quite naturally to them. In our conversations regarding their curricular intentions, they shared how they altered the district provided curriculum to something that works better for them as teachers and meets the diverse needs of their students.

The curricular intentions of the Black male elementary teachers in this study were largely driven by student engagement and success. The major themes related to their instructional practices as they often used teaching as a way to fill in the gaps of the curriculum. However, each participant embraced the null curriculum and included that curriculum in the operational curriculum—the actual curriculum delivered. The participants identified what was missing from the curriculum and sought ways to include it in the curriculum they taught. Each participant addressed different aspects of the null curriculum. Antonio created a month-long math curriculum that sought to include family members in the math-learning process. This curriculum

mirrored the communal practices Givens (2021) described, except it extended beyond the classroom and into the home. Lawrence also utilized communal practices in the activities in which students learned together in teams. Wesley integrated art and technology into the lessons he conducted by having students create podcasts. While art and computer classes are separate courses for his elementary students, he intended to bring those two subjects together to not only engage students in literacy and math learning. Mike sought to bring in a more focused Black History Month curriculum to his students when he realized campus level initiatives did not provide the depth which he felt was necessary for students to understand the contributions Blacks made to this country. Each participant recognized that the curriculum they utilized was not complete. The curriculum lacked, or was void of something vital to the students' learning. These teachers' intentions was to fill that void and restore the curriculum. Despite their intentions for their students, the campus culture often impeded on their ability to actualize those intentions. The campus culture largely influenced the teaching practices of Black male elementary teachers.

Q2     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male elementary school teachers?

The experiences of teachers in this study coincide with the low representation of Black male teachers in schools, as Black teachers often leave teaching due to poor work environments and perceptions of dysfunctional administration (Bristol, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). Participants cited the campus a source of frustration for the teachers. Each of them had different campus-based reasons for their frustrations, but they all related back to the root word *under*. Underappreciated, undervalued, underwhelmed, and underexposed. I use the term underexposed because it relates to photography, and aligns with the arts-based research I set out to conduct. This section provides a look at how campus culture influences the Black male elementary teachers in this study.



## Underexposed Teacher

“Underexposure is the result of not enough light hitting the film strip or camera sensor. Underexposed photos are too dark, have very little detail in their shadows, and appear murky” (Basic Photography 101: A Beginner’s Guide to Understanding Overexposure and Underexposure,” 2021). The underexposed teacher is one who has “very little detail in their shadows,” or in this case they lack guidance, support, and consideration for leadership roles in curriculum and instruction. With the exception of Wesley, none of the participants held leadership roles like grade level lead or department chair. And while none of them expressed wanting those types of leadership roles, they did not express that administration had sought them out for those roles either.

Each participant highlighted ways in which he was overlooked by school staff. Antonio highlighted a situation in which he worked as a paraprofessional and then substitute teacher while a teacher was out on maternity leave. During that time, students performed on target, and he exposed some practices that were outside the recommendations of the programs utilized. He admitted that he “ruffled some feathers,” and quickly learned “that I can’t be everyone’s friend. Because at the end of the day, it’s about what is best for the students” (Wesley). Wesley expressed similar sentiments in that even though he was in an instructional leadership position, school staff did not always seek his expertise when he could be of help—his suggestions were overlooked (Mitchell, 2016).

Even though each participant possessed a wealth of knowledge regarding their content and understanding of student developmental needs, they wanted to learn from others in order to develop their craft. In fact, Mike shared that he desired to learn from the other teachers on his campus. “I don’t get to know any of those other teachers that much and what they do, because

again, I'm kind of stuck in my whole year with my team. When I do get to go into another teacher's room and I see good teaching, or I see good things on the wall, it blows my mind because I'm a fan of good teaching. I'm a fan of well decorated rooms. Right. And so that's one of the tough things" (Mike). While the district provides professional development opportunities, Mike's comments spoke to wanting more connection, and even communal learning, with his campus staff and the ability to develop their own campus-based professional learning practices.

### **The Burden of Stereotypes**

None of the teachers shared that teaching staff questioned their intentions and motives, but it did seep out during our discussions. Wesley mentioned the stereotype of male teachers in general as being pedophiles simply because they chose to work in elementary school. He noted that he goes out of his way to show that he's trustworthy with young students. I asked Wesley if he felt as though his White male teaching counterparts had the same concerns.

No, I don't think so. Cause we actually talked about that. Yeah. And they were like, I didn't even think of it like that. There's a reason. So I try to like, you know, the saying that, Black males have to work twice as hard. That's what I'm doing. I feel as if I have to work twice as hard to make sure that I'm not only qualified, but I can actually handle my job, which is disappointing. However, it is what it is (Wesley).

Wesley touched on a prominent stereotype in his statement. The stereotype has to do with the belief that Black people are lazy. The stereotype often shows up in discussions about economics and welfare benefits—the term “welfare queen” comes to mind. Connections between laziness and African Americans date back to post-Reconstruction (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2013).

This image of the lazy Black appears throughout antebellum history's popular culture from magazine and newspaper political cartoons to Vaudeville. But again, these

depictions had a dual purpose. As scholars such as Lipsitz and Gross point out, such representations worked as much to create and sustain an investment in White racial group identity as it did to negatively and explicitly stereotype Blacks. Thus, the most important aspect of the historical representation of the lazy Black is trifold in that it creates the stereotype; institutes the binary, racial distinction on both sides of that stereotype (Black-Lazy/White-working); and engenders a relationship between Blacks who do no work, yet benefit from White labor. (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2013, p.1160).

Wesley's awareness of this stereotype and reaction to it, displays the binary racial distinction. Wesley felt as though he has no choice but to work harder than the non-White males at his school. Furthermore, the White males were not even aware, or did not feel compelled to "work harder" even though they too were in the minority in comparison to the number of female teachers on campus. The feelings of inferiority associated with the historical representation of laziness as a Black trait was one that Wesley sought to overcome. Mike touched on this as well.

And I wanted young white people as well as blacks, but I wanted young whites and others to see that Blacks can have proper dialect, that we can have emotions that we, that we can be smart. We can be funny and all those things, but we can do this job. And it was just important for me to know that or to let others know that we could. And again, just a representation of the race. I always felt representing the race and all that I do (Mike).

Mike goes on to say:

And then I want them to see the professional Black male competing on the same levels as every other gender, every other race. I want them to see that I can be here every day that I can show up on time. I'm not using curse words. I'm showing love and compassion. I'm having fun (Mike).

Like Wesley, Mike placed an emphasis on showing that that he can do what many perceive to be basic functions of the job: showing up on time and using appropriate language.

The participants also touched on the notion that they would not be taken seriously unless they participated in athletic instruction. Wesley left coaching altogether when he moved to the elementary school he is at now. Antonio and Lawrence both shared the assumption that they should coach or add a physical education certification. Lawrence shared that he interviewed for some positions and noticed that the Black male staff were more assertive, or did assume coaching positions. He said he was told by interviewing principals that they wanted someone more assertive, or someone who did coach. However, when he interviewed for kindergarten or first grade positions they tried to put him with the older elementary grades. “I’m glad you mentioned this. In my interviews, people also wouldn’t take me seriously as a kindergarten or a first grade teacher” (Lawrence). Lawrence is a tall Black man who towers over not only his students, but many adults. Lawrence shared that when he interviewed, administrators questioned why he was not applying for a coaching job or a job with older students. Despite this, Lawrence remained confident in his ability and his identity as an early childhood educator.

I definitely felt that, um, at times, um, and sometimes I will say like, they really want me in this role, but I will say I will never accept a position outside of early childhood because just because you feel a certain way because of who I am, right. Doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m right for that position because of how you perceive me, because my contributions in the role that I served, that I know how I am as I self-identify as early childhood educator (Lawrence).

For Antonio, a mentor in the teaching field told him that it was not wise to go into teaching unless he added a physical education or coaching endorsement. With the exception of

Wesley, none of the participants had such endorsements, and he no longer utilized those endorsements.

The participants did not make it clear if the belief that Black male teachers should coach or teach physical education classes was expressed on their campus, but they did express judgment and questioning. Lawrence did not go into detail about the judgment he faced from school staff, but expressed that he enjoyed the teaching and learning that takes place inside his classroom—he just could not handle the judgment he experienced outside of the classroom. Antonio shared that more needed to be done to make Black male educators comfortable on elementary campuses.

**Q3     How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?**

Each participant utilized culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms. One of the negative effects of working in silos and the exclusion participants faced was that this pedagogy was not shared with other teachers on the campus who could benefit from learning new ways to interact with their racially diverse students. (Milner, 2016). Understanding what culturally responsive pedagogy entails is vital to understanding how this type of teaching is exercised by the Black men in this study. Culturally responsive pedagogy can best be described as a bridge between a student's home, cultural and linguistic practices and that of the school (Richards et al., 2007). "Culturally responsive teaching requires a thoughtful consideration of what curriculum to use (place-based/culturally-relevant) and how to structure the teaching and learning relationship (cyclic/relational instruction) in culturally-respectful ways" (Rischel & Zuercher, 2016, p. 48). In order to become culturally responsive, teachers need to reflect on their own identity and teaching. "Because teachers' values impact relationships with students and their families, teachers must reconcile negative feelings towards any cultural, language or ethnic group. Often

teachers are resistant to the notion that their values might reflect prejudices or even racism towards certain groups” (Richards et al., 2007, p. 65). While their reasons for doing so varied, each of them enacted purposeful teaching which involved them studying their students in order to infuse validating instruction for them. Wesley exhibited this when he sought to see with the lens of the students.

The process was pretty much looking through the eyes of a child. I wanted to see what it was. When I was growing up, how it was and how I can make that relatable to the current kids here. And, I wrote a lot of stuff down, and I'm gonna go ahead and read that. Uh, we are becoming increasingly aware of the impacts of a global pandemic on students' mental health and well-being. Researchers have started to report findings on mental health and how it impacts our students and also with the COVID-19 pandemic and what it does to children and youth. Studies show that social distance and stay-at-home measurements implemented at the beginning of the pandemic results in increased reports of depression and anxiety among students. So my process was looking through the eyes of a child, and that's what I've always wanted to do (Wesley).

Wesley emphasized his own childhood experiences as a Black boy in schools as being his motivation, but he still puts the interests, cultures, and needs of his students first. This coincides with Gay’s framework for culturally responsive pedagogy, which purports as one of the six tenets that the practices “affirm and acknowledge the cultural backgrounds, experiences, worldviews, ideas, ideals, and values of students and their families. Validation also means that teachers understand and merge outside of school realities with those inside of school and work with not against student preferences and interests” (Milner, 2016, p. 422).

### **Authentic Responsiveness**

Wesley was not the only one to share how his childhood experiences shaped his teaching practices. All of them were impacted by the teaching and learning they experienced as Black males in elementary schools. For some, like Lawrence, elementary school was a place that nurtured his curiosity and developed his love of learning. He also benefited from having a Black male teacher in first grade. That teacher advocated for Lawrence early in his life. His overwhelmingly positive experience as a Black male in school was a catalyst for him to enter the teaching field.

Antonio and Wesley's experiences in elementary school differed greatly. Wesley can cite specific examples of teachers who targeted him because of his race and gender.

My childhood and elementary school was pretty different. The reason being I really didn't have any teachers that motivated me for the most part, because some of them did have that adage where, "they're black boys and they're not going to turn out to be anything."

Matter of fact, I did have a teacher telling me that, and that was my motivation (Wesley). Antonio's experience differed from that because even as he excelled, school staff did not encourage, support or advocate for his success. They were not responsive to his needs as a twice exceptional student. In fact, at the private catholic school he attended, his first grade teacher refused to help him advance his reading skills. I asked Antonio if he felt that his teacher refused to help him read because of his race or because of his special needs. "I mean, thinking back I truly believed it was both. I mean, from that point on, I developed kind of this attitude from my family members that, 'you know, you are a smart, equal, and you can do anything you choose'" (Antonio). Fortunately, Antonio had the family support to mitigate the harmful effects of his teacher's actions.

While Mike did remember experiencing some racism as an elementary student, his career as a juvenile probation officer propelled his interest in teaching. He recognized that if someone could intervene before students ended up in the juvenile justice system, then they might not end up there. He also recognized the importance of all students seeing a Black man in a positive role like a teacher. Even though he made a positive impact in the lives of youth as a probation officer, the role was strictly disciplinary and did not allow for prevention or meaningful change in a flawed system.

It's just so important, I think. And that's what I want these kids to see: that image of a strong Black male in here. And one other thing that kind of makes me effective is that I'm transparent with the kids. When I don't know something, I don't know something when I didn't know (Mike).

To see Mike's transparency with his students was refreshing, and it challenged dominant thinking regarding the role of Black male educators as authoritarian (Hayes et al., 2014).

### **Restoring the Curriculum**

One of the most interesting outcomes of this study was how the participants negotiated and manipulated curriculum. Each of them identified different content that was missing from the curriculum they taught. They recognized what Eisner (1998) described as the null curriculum—something that is not taught. The district-provided curriculum leaves out something vital as perceived by the teacher which each participant reframed into his own curriculum.

Each participant drew on different aspects of their identity as Black men to culturally mediate adaptations to the existing curricula. I call this mediation, the *restored curriculum*. Definitions of the word restored revolve around repairing something that is damaged or lost. The verb restore provides this definition: “To make amends for; to compensate or make good (loss or



damage)” (Restored, n.d.). This definition aligned with a teacher who has to make sense of a curriculum that is missing something they consider vital. It aligned with the image of a teacher as an artist who restores a damaged image. Just like with relationships, when something is restored it is not perfect or new, but it has been altered by the damage. The scars and imperfections because of the damage were still present, although healed. The curriculum these teachers developed lives within the existing curriculum. Because they cannot completely replace the district curriculum, they build on the restored curriculum’s imperfections. For example, Lawrence’s district-provided curriculum required students to learn phonics, but did not allow space for the music and movement he felt was necessary. Since there was no music or instruction on how students should move in order to learn, Lawrence found music and movements that would work for the lessons. Although they were not designed for the lessons (imperfections), Lawrence found ways to incorporate music and movement so that it amended the curriculum. In this section I identify how each participant identified the null, negotiated space for the null, and finally arrived at a purposeful, responsive curriculum.

### **Spicing Up the Curriculum with Lawrence**

Lawrence first identified that the curriculum he used lacked music and movement. He identified that he wanted to “spice it up,” and this is where his curricular and pedagogical intentions intersected. For Lawrence music and movement became the restored curriculum.

“As an African-American male, I would say I put a greater emphasis on movement and music. And of course, as a primary grades teacher, it's very important to just use musical ways to really assimilate new learning” (Lawrence). As Lawrence talked further about this, I learned that the repetition of listening to a reggae beat driven alphabet song was purposeful in many ways. One, it exposed students to a type of music they may not have listened to in other educational

settings. Furthermore, by watching the video, they were able to see a Black man, Anthony Broughton, Ph.D., leading a racially diverse group of students in song and dance. Broughton, a musical artist who creates original content on YouTube, is also a Black male educator. At the age of thirty, Broughton earned his doctorate in early childhood education and contributed to the body of research on Black male educators through the *Call Me MISTER* program. (Clemson University, 2021; NAEYC.org, 2021). Broughton's own ideas regarding using music and movement in the classroom mirror Lawrence's intentions. "Affectionately known as 'MiSTER B or Dr. B.' by teachers and young/tiny scholars worldwide, Dr. B. supports teachers in interweaving music and movement into their curriculums to foster all areas of development" (NAEYC.org, 2021). The interweaving of music and movement into the curriculum appeared effortless as Broughton's videos engaged learners, and Lawrence, a second year teacher, integrated it so naturally.. Lawrence's culturally based intentions for his students' learning, as does his care for his students, foster his creativity in adding music and movement to a restored curriculum. By adding music and movement to his curriculum, Lawrence was more culturally responsive as well. In his teaching, Lawrence used "performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Milner, 2016, p. 421).

### **Antonio's Curriculum for Parental Involvement**

Antonio's tasks each day constantly changed. While he is mostly responsible for literacy and mathematics related interventions within his classroom, he also provides support for students in their general education classrooms. On top of that, he is the special education case-manager for a large number of students in the school. Despite the many hats he wears, Antonio drew on his own experience as not only a Black boy in school, but one with special needs. He also

identified an area of need for his own students: parental support. Faced with the challenges of not having enough time in the classroom with his students, Antonio created a month-long, take-home mathematics curriculum. In order to ensure success with the curriculum, Antonio modeled for the students the processes to work through the problems. Then, the students modeled the processes for their parents. Once the students took home the curriculum, the parents could help them work through the problems. Then the students were able to bring the questions to class, and Antonio would address them in his small intervention group.

Antonio's collective learning process has roots in the inherited practice of communal learning. Givens (2021) discusses how Carter G. Woodson utilized communal literacy with his father. "Again, the young Woodson was required to lean on the inherited practice of 'communal literacy,' just as he did when reading to his father—a practice he maintained through his early twenties. By reading to and for others, Woodson made it possible for those around him to engage with ideas and interact with the written word" (p. 39). While Antonio created something similar in the area of mathematics, he opened up mathematics to more people through his curriculum. His intentions were to increase parental involvement, but his restored curriculum allowed for more people to learn.

### **Sir Wesley's Self-Reflection Curriculum**

There were many places where Wesley addressed areas missing from the curriculum, but the key theme that was reflected in our conversations, his photographs, and his teaching was self-reflection. Wesley first modeled self-reflection by sharing his practices for self-care with his students.

I'm very self-aware, and I don't react in anger. I know what to do when things are out of hand. And then I started going right into childhood and childhood should be the most cherished experience growing up for a six year old for the future. But today the younger have unfortunately been wired and immersed into the information world and are being exposed to behaviors and lifestyle practices and their mind, they're young and its information the minds are not equipped to handle. They will find it difficult to determine the difference between what is real and what is not (Wesley).

Because of this belief, he spent time helping students discern what is real and what is not. He then spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the needs and desires of his students. He started by listening to his students, and then giving them an outlet to share their reflections: podcasts.

By listening to his students and providing them an outlet, Wesley nurtured their sense of self-determination. He helped them realize that their small critiques of the school signaled larger problems. While he tried to give students control over their own education, he recognized the ways in which the education system in general stifles this. His thoughts, and subsequent actions with his students, echoed the thoughts and actions of Carter G. Woodson who recognized how the education system attempted to rid Black people control over their own education. "Negroes have no control over their education and have little voice in their other affairs pertaining thereto" (Givens, 2021, p. 105). His actions also echoed that of W.E.B Du Bois who noted that "the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,--darkly as through a veil, and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission" (Du Bois, 1903/2013, p. 9).

By adding podcast creation to the existing curriculum, Wesley responded to what he identified as the null—student self-reflection—and made it the operational curriculum. Furthermore, self-reflection, and more specifically self-understanding, allowed students to fully engage with the content. When teachers provide opportunities for students to bring themselves to their classwork, schooling becomes more meaningful and students feel validated (C.A.M. Banks, 2007; Milner, 2016).

Self-understanding, along with knowledge of the histories, modal characteristics, and intragroup differences of ethnic groups are competencies required for teachers to implement equity pedagogy. They provide a foundation for teachers to identify, create, and implement teaching strategies that enhance the academic achievement of students of both genders and from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (C.A.M. Banks, 2007, p. 101).

Wesley recognized that not only were opportunities for self-reflection missing from the curriculum, but he would also have to provide a tool for students to use to access and share their knowledge of self. He found the podcast to be the most engaging way to do this.

Everything that I do is intentional. That's for a reason, I just don't pull stuff out of a hat. I'm not like that. I tend to really put thought into it to where they can always go back and pick up something new if they didn't think of it, this assessment, because that's what I do with things all the time. I can read an article and think of one thing. Then I come back and read it and I'm thinking something different. Right? So that's what I wanted to do in this instant. And honestly, these kids, they don't see that we are so stuck on academics. I'm looking at real world how. So, what I do is I get input from them as we just sit there, I'll put a microphone and a camera let's talk. We have structure after the

fact, but at first I like it all organic: we're just in the moment. And that's how their thing is. And a lot of ideas and a lot of things that I've done, they came up with, I just want to be a voice for them. I know how to, I know what they like. So let's make it to work.

(Wesley).

Wesley did more than just make it work. He allowed his students to shine.

### **Mike's Black History Curriculum**

I end this section on the restored curriculum with Mike. His curricula most explicitly reflected his intentions for student learning. His curriculum displayed how his intentions intersected with his identity as a Black man. Upon our first interview, he shared how important it was for him to share Black history to his students. He identified the gaps in his school's current curriculum and filled them in mostly by using poetry. He shared with students the works of Langston Hughes, and often used his poems as a supplement to the literature curriculum the district provided.

Another way I add it to my curriculum is through passages. So that's one way just in how, when I'm able to pull passages that I know come from Black authors or something, but again, I don't know a whole lot of them. Then the second way is like what we just experienced black history month. I told the kids and I've been doing it since I was at that middle school. I realized the importance of Black history because I grew up in the seventies. And although I realize it's a fading thing, I'm going to carry the torch to continue to teach Black history. And I'm not going to turn it loose (Mike).

Unlike Woodson and first teachers to honor Black History Month, Mike teaches a diverse student population; he does not only teach Black students. By including Black history in his curriculum, he not only exposes non-Black students to the contributions. Some students, Black

and non-Black, were apathetic towards learning about Black history, but his desire to continue the tradition kept him motivated to keep teaching.

Every day I would give them at least two Blacks. We would watch a video taking about 10 or 15 minutes out of every day's curriculum. This was difficult. It's got me behind, but again, I feel Black history is important. So every day I showed them a couple of videos. And then on Friday, they would have to go back and name, however many they could, with the names and what they're famous for. And based on how many they could tell me, I kind of determined how many treats they got (Mike).

While assessing his curriculum started rocky, each week more and more students wanted to participate. He realized the initial motivation may have been the treats, but students, regardless of race, saw the value of learning about Black history and displayed that to me as they shared their knowledge on famous African Americans. Mike's intentions were for his students to learn about the contributions of Black people, as well as see Black people in a positive light. His responsive curriculum challenged the existing curriculum that he identified as not having sufficient Black history.

### **Significant Snapshots**

The significance of this study unfolded while writing it. As mentioned at the beginning of this work, the social climate and recent police shooting-deaths of unarmed Black men led to a shift in the interests of stakeholders. Each week, I received emails inviting me to webinars on anti-racist teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy and other race-related educational topics. At the time, I was perplexed by this sudden shift in interest from high stakes testing to the needs of minority students. Even more concerning, minorities led less than a handful of the dozens of professional learning events I attended. I can only recall one led by a Black man, and it

addressed Black boys and the school-to-prison pipeline with a focus on discipline. While discipline-related events highlighted restorative practices, there was very little attention given to culturally responsive pedagogy. The presenters did not address the ways Black men teach with care and focus on advocacy, and how that can challenge longstanding notions of oppression and racism. Instead, presenters at the events admired the problem presented in American schools rather than attempting to remedy it.

Even though the presenters of these events only shined a light on the problem, that light quickly dimmed when the opponents of critical race theory sought to extinguish any efforts toward equity. Without naming critical race theory in the Texas House bill, proponents stifled conversations around controversial issues. For example, many of the inherited practices of Black men developed in response to oppressive forces that limited the education of Black people. If students and teachers do not have conversations regarding the foundations of inherited practices, it could limit the already dismal number of Black male elementary educators in the future. This has implications for postsecondary education, specifically colleges of education and alternative teacher education programs. Recruitment of potential Black male educators may not respond to the systems of oppression that keep Black males out of those spaces. Additionally, the voices of Black male educators may be largely absent from the research future teachers would study. The lack of access to the teaching practices of Black male elementary teachers is of great significance to me, the researcher, and why I embarked on this study. Adding their voices to educational research enhances teaching practices for all future teachers, especially non-Black educators working with Black youth who now have context when studying culturally relevant pedagogy.



In order to add to existing research, I addressed three questions related to the teaching practices and curricular decision-making of Black male elementary teachers:

- Q1     What are the intentions of Black male teachers for their students?
- Q2     In what ways does the campus culture influence the intentions and practices of Black male school teachers?
- Q3     How do cultural identity and gender intersect to inform and influence their curricular decision-making and instructional practices?

The findings of this study indicate that Black male elementary teachers' sense of spirituality influences how they enact care towards their students. Their intentions of care are characterized by duty to represent their race positively and to advocate for their students. Their intentions for their students allowed them to rely on communal pedagogy practices. Additionally, the participants all identified areas of the curriculum they taught that lacked a component they deemed as critical. Each found ways to reintegrate that critical component into a flawed curriculum. The new curriculum they created by pairing together a damaged curriculum with a vital element became the restored curriculum. The restored curriculum is a reminder of the beauty that come from pain and suffering. While not ideal, the participants made their curriculum worthy and engaging for students. Their own childhood experiences as Black boys was the motivation for them to care for students and restore the parts of the unjust education system they could control: the curriculum.

Other teachers could learn quite a bit from the participants of this study. However, the findings reveal that exclusion and harmful stereotypes both on the campus and in the teaching field in general made it difficult for Black male elementary teachers to feel fully comfortable at work. Participants noted that they had to work harder than their non-Black peers, and they went to great lengths to be a positive representation of their race.

## Reflections on Critical Race Theory

How, then, can the school ignore the duty of teaching the truth, while these other agencies are playing up falsehoods?

—Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro*

I chose critical race theory to frame my study because it highlights the problems regarding race that others want to ignore. When critical race theory is enacted in educational research, it critiques the status quo in American education. In this study, a critical race theory practice called counterstorytelling was used to share the experiences of the Black men whose work counters the stereotypes associated with Black people. “Counterstorytelling is a methodological tool with a history in communities of color that use oral interpretation to convey stories and struggles often not validated by the dominant culture.” (Reynolds, 2010, p. 148). The experiential knowledge in this study includes the sharing of culturally relevant pedagogy, specifically the inherited practices of the participants. The counterstories of the men in this study show that care can be enacted through advocacy and Black men think deeply about what they teach and how they teach it. The data collected in this study through interviews, observations, and photography provided accounts of misrepresentation and stereotyping and how that impacts the school systems. “CRT sheds light on how both the macro- and microenvironments of schooling are permeated with cultural values, allowing the manifestations of racist beliefs to take on both institutional and individual forms. This light is needed for school officials to recognize their role in these manifestations” (Reynolds, 2010, p. 158). Although these counterstories did not bring about immediate change, they reiterated the need for more Black male elementary teachers who feel welcomed into those spaces instead of driven away.

At the time of concluding this work, the Texas House and Senate passed a bill that bans teachers from talking about race, white supremacy, or current news events. Texas House Bill 3979 (2021) outlines specifically that teachers may not discuss current events related to public policy or social affairs. “No teacher shall be compelled by a policy of any state agency, school district, campus, open-enrollment charter school, or school administration to discuss current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs.”

I thought about this bill and how it might affect Mike who may someday want honor the legacies of the Black men and women who police murdered. I thought about how this bill might affect Wesley who challenged his elementary students to look beyond the things they do not like about school and identify the inequities and oppression that exist within school systems. This would not only affect the ways in which Black male educators teach, but also who gets to teach. This bill could stifle the voices of Black male educators, and the trickle-down effect of that could lead to less Black boys seeing teaching as a viable, worthy career option.

The Black male teachers in this study challenge the stereotypes associated with their race and gender. Future generations of Black male teachers may not feel compelled to challenge those stereotypes. Givens (2021) offers this assessment of early postbellum Black educators who reinforced the narratives of the dominant White supremacy:

Many black teachers, being mis-educated themselves, lacked a critical interrogation of white supremacy...As long as the dominant systems of representation continued to be the basis of black teachers’ professional training and the main source of their teaching, their efforts were likely to collude with the structural program of mis-education. This was the case whether or not this collusion was intentional on the part of the teacher (p. 105).

This critical interrogation of white supremacy is only possible with the critical race theory framework and those similar to it. The study benefitted from having critical race theory as a framework because it provided a means to analyze existing educational systems.

Since this study is not an exhaustive study of the experiences of Black male elementary educators, there are still stories to be told using critical race theory. Educational connoisseurship and criticism allowed me to examine the nuanced teaching of these men, their curricular decision-making, and their teaching art. I captured all of this through observations, interviews, and the participants' own artistic data creations—autophotography. Researchers may want to utilize certain aspects of autophotography or even explore the use of Polaroids, which allow for instant development and provide a space for participants to caption right away. My study did not address the lived experiences of these men. Researchers may want to conduct studies using other methodologies such as phenomenology or critical narrative to explore those stories.

These future studies may not see the light if the erasure of critical race theory becomes a reality. When police murdered elementary school cafeteria monitor Philando Castile, I remembered how celebrated he was in death. I wondered if his school staff, school district, students, and their families celebrated him when he was alive. That pondering led me to this study. I wanted to know if schools celebrated Black male teachers were celebrated. Sadly, while the schools celebrated the participants, they were not celebrated as curriculum leaders or instructional leaders except for one. Their responsive curriculums were not recognized as vital or transferable to other teachers. Instead, the campus culture was one of judgment and exclusion—the participants did some of the exclusion as a means of protection. While the title of this dissertation was, “It’s Elementary,” nothing about the participants’ experiences were straightforward, basic, or easy. These participants undergo complicated and hard processes to

bring their responsive curriculum to their students. It is my honor to share their stories here, and celebrate Black male elementary teachers in life and death.

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**APPENDIX A**

**POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT SURVEY**

### Potential Participant Survey

We are interested in studying the experiences of Black male elementary educators. To determine if you meet the participant characteristics required for this study, please answer the questions below.

1. Do you identify as African-American / Black? (born in the United States and having one or more American-born Black biological parent)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you identify as male?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Are you currently working as a full-time educator in an elementary school setting?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Which of the following best describes your educator role?
  - a. Classroom Teacher
  - b. School Counselor
  - c. Classroom Teaching Assistant/Paraprofessional
  - d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Which of the following best describes your elementary school setting?
  - a. Public elementary school
  - b. Private elementary school
  - c. Charter elementary school
  - d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Would you be able to discuss in detail your instructional (teaching) practices with one other person?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. Would you be able to discuss in detail how you make decisions regarding the curriculum used in your classroom?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
8. Would you be able discuss your overall experience as a Black male elementary educator?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

**APPENDIX B**

**CONSENT FORM for HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**  
**in RESEARCH**



## CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

University of Northern Colorado

**Study Title:** It's Elementary: The Curricular Decision-making and Instructional Practices of Black Male Elementary Teachers

**Researcher:**

Ashlea Campbell, MEd, Doctoral Candidate, [camp1904@bears.unco.edu](mailto:camp1904@bears.unco.edu), (469) 594-0726

**Research Advisor:** Christine McConnell, Ph.D., Educational Foundations & Curriculum Studies

Phone: 970-351-2438

Email: [christine.mcconnell@unco.edu](mailto:christine.mcconnell@unco.edu)

**Purpose and Background:**

This study explores curricular decision-making and instructional practices of four Black male elementary educators. Research on this topic is minimal, and the investigator hopes to fill the gap on this topic.

Data will be collected for analysis utilizing four methods: one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, autophotography, and gathering of artifacts. There will be four or five 30 minute observations that will take place in the educators' own classroom. The interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to develop themes for developing an understanding of how teachers perceive the incorporation of writing in mathematics. Interviews will take no more than 60 minutes. Participants will engage in autophotography in which they will photograph items related to their role as educators and write explanations for each photograph.

Participants and researchers will mutually agree to a pseudonym before the research study takes place, for all analysis and reporting purposes. Transcripts of interviews will be kept in a locked file in the Research Advisor's office for three years.

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will be observed four or five times in 30 minute increments during classroom instruction.
- You will be asked questions about your curriculum decision-making and instructional practices.
- You will be asked to provide artifacts of your teaching.
- You will be asked to photograph artifacts of your teaching and journal about each photograph.

**Confidentiality:** By participating in this study, you have given us permission to release information to the research team. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for the participants. The notes from the observations will be kept in a password protected Google file. In addition, the interview audio recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password protected Google file. Audio recordings will be deleted once transcripts have been written and analyzed. When in use, all original

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(Participant Initials)

Page 1 of 2

recordings will be kept in a password protected file in the respective researcher's home office. The results of this study may be published in professional literature however, no publication will contain information that will identify you. After transcription, identifying information will be removed. All files related to participant interviews will be kept for three years and then deleted. Any paper documentation will be shredded at the three year mark.

**Risks:** The foreseeable risks in this study include possible stress as participants are being observed by researchers and audio recorded during interviews. If emotional distress occurs, the UNC Counseling Center may be contacted for free counseling services. Contact information is listed below.

UNC Counseling Center  
1901 10th Ave., Greeley, CO 80639  
970-351-2496

**Benefits:** The foreseeable benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to discuss and reflect on your own teaching practices and the possibility of forming new perceptions of your own approaches to teaching. By participating in this study, you are helping build a professional teaching database in this area of study.

**Costs:** The cost of participating in this study is the time invested to participate in the interviews. Compensation will include a gift card to a local bakery or restaurant.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researchers by phone or email. You may also contact the research advisor, Dr. Christine McConnell, by phone or email.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**  
**INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### Initial Interview Questions

1. What is your educational background? What degrees have you earned or are in the process of earning?
2. Have you had any careers outside of the field of education?
  - a. If so, in those careers fields were there other Black males?
3. What led you to a career in education?
  - a. How did you come about working in an elementary school?
4. What do you like about working in an elementary school?
  - a. Is there anything you don't like about working in an elementary school?
5. Thinking back to your own elementary school experience, what contributed to your overall experience and impression?
  - a. Would you describe your experience in elementary school as overwhelmingly positive or negative? Why?
  - b. In what ways did your race impact your elementary experience?
  - c. In what ways did your gender impact your elementary experience?
  - d. How did being a Black male youth affect your elementary experience?
6. How has your own elementary school experience impacted your decision to work in an elementary school?
7. In what ways does your elementary school experience impact your teaching practices?
8. In what ways do your race and gender influence your teaching (instructional) practices?
9. In what ways do your race and gender influence the curriculum you utilize in your classroom?

10. In your own opinion, what is the best thing about being a Black male elementary school educator?

a. What is the worst thing?



**APPENDIX D**  
**AUTOPHOTOGRAPHY GUIDE**

### Autophotography Guide

Before our next meeting, please complete the following activities.

1. Think about your role as an educator, and your identity as a Black male.
2. Think about the intentions you have for your students.
3. Feel free to journal or take notes to clarify your thoughts. You may submit your notes to the study, or you may keep them private.
4. After you've formulated your thoughts, make a list of people, places, and things related to your roles and identities.
5. Then, you will take photos of some of the items and places that relate to the work you do. Please refrain from taking pictures of minors or those who have not consented to be part of this study.
6. You may create captions for each picture. However, we will discuss them too.
7. Please try to take 7-12 pictures for this activity.

**APPENDIX E**

**FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### Follow-up Interview Questions

1. What was your process for selecting the photos you used?
2. Do you feel as though the photos represent you? How so?
3. Can you share with me something you wrote about one or more of your photos?
  - a. Why is this significant?
4. Thinking back to the lessons I observed. What choices led you to including the materials and activities you did?
5. Why did you approach the lessons the way you did?
6. Is there anything else you want to add?

**APPENDIX F****RESEARCH SITE PERMISSION LETTER for the  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**



# RESEARCH SITE PERMISSION LETTER for the UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

School Name

Address

December \_\_, 2020

Dear University of Northern Colorado IRB,

Based on our review of the proposed research by Ashlea Campbell under the supervision of Dr. Christine McConnell, Ph.D., I give my permission for them to conduct the study “It’s Elementary: The Curricular Decision-making and Instructional Practices of Black Male Elementary Teachers” within \_\_\_\_\_ School. I authorize the researchers to conduct classroom observations as well as in person interviews with one faculty member. Individuals’ participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization’s only responsibility includes providing available personnel for observation and interviewing purposes. A pseudonym will be used when reporting for both the participant and the school site. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if circumstances change.

We understand that the research will include four or five observations and two interviews with one teacher about his curricular decision-making and instructional practices.

This authorization covers the time period of December 1st, 2020 through April 30th, 2021.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Site Coordinator/Principal

Email address

**APPENDIX G**

**OBSERVATION PROTOCOL**

### Observation Protocol

<b>Physical Setting</b>	Time of day/class being taught Desk set-up Lighting Technology Anchor charts Student samples	
<b>Participants</b>	Number of students Demographic of class Grade level Organization of students Teacher/support/other	
<b>Activities &amp; Interactions</b>	Student-Student interactions Student- teacher interactions Structure of activity Demonstration of learning	
<b>Conversation</b>	Content of student-student interaction Content of teacher-student interaction Who speaks to whom? Who is listening? Note direct quotes, silences, and non-verbal communication	
<b>Subtle Factors</b>	Informal or unplanned activities Nonverbal communication What is not happening that should be?	
<b>Observer's Behavior</b>	Role in the room? How does this role affect the scene? Thoughts during observation	



**APPENDIX H**  
**CAPTION CREATION GUIDE**

### Caption Creation Guide

As you prepare to caption your selected photographs, use different aspects of your identity to inspire you. Typically, photo captions are a selection of words or phrases. Captions may be descriptive or metaphorical. The captions are unique to the individual providing the caption. For example, one may photograph a leaf and caption it “Green Leaf on a Log.” However, someone else may photograph a similar leaf and caption it “All Alone.” The following section may serve as a guide for creating captions.

**Thing About Your Role**

Generate 2-3 words that relate to your role on campus

**Think About Your Identity**

Generate 2-3 words that relate to your identity

**Your Intentions**

Generate 2-3 words that relate to the intentions you have for your students

**The Future**

If you looked at this photo five years from now, what would you want to remember about it?

**Your Feelings**

What feelings does this picture invoke in you?

**APPENDIX I**  
**RECRUITMENT FLYER**

## Appendix I

## Recruitment Flyer



SEEKING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

# Black Male Elementary educators

Visit:  
<https://tinyurl.com/BMEEstudy>



The flyer features a photograph of a Black man wearing a black fedora, glasses, a white shirt, a black bow tie, and a grey sweater. He is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a metal fence. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image, and a QR code is positioned in the lower right corner.

**APPENDIX J**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**



Date: 01/27/2021  
 Principal Investigator: Ashlea Campbell  
 Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**  
 Action Date: 01/27/2021  
 Protocol Number: 2012017796  
 Protocol Title: It's Elementary: The Curricular Decision-making and Instructional Practices of Black Male Elementary Teachers  
 Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(701) for research involving

Category 1 (2018): RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

**As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:**

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).



- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. \*You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse  
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784