“IT'S NOT A BAD SCHOOL, IT'S JUST THE TEACHERS”: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEIVED MATTERING

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

The Black Lives Matter movement has emphasized addressing Black students' experiences in school and inspired educators and administrators to look beyond test scores to evaluate whether Black students are receiving interpersonal support, feeling integral to their school, and experiencing a sense of "mattering". The culture gap between the predominately white educator workforce and the increasingly racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse student population raises questions about the efficacy of their pedagogy for all students. By examining Black students' articulations of their relationships with educators, experiences of culturally relevant pedagogy, and perceptions of mattering, this study seeks to identify practices that facilitate positive school experiences for Black students. The current study explores the educational experiences of five adolescent Black boys, all attending the same urban high school, in a mid-Atlantic state. Data was collected using a qualitative approach to examine their experiences related to school and mattering through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, and analyzed using a deductive theoretically grounded and inductive thematic analysis-based approach. I found five themes, titled using the participants' voiced insights, across the participants' narratives: "They invest in our success", "They look out for us", "They humanize us", "They don't care about us", and "We want to reach our full potential". I discuss the findings in terms of their integration with previous research and theory and explore their implications and directions for future research. This study addresses a critical gap in research by centering the voices of Black students to examine their lived experiences and perspectives on educational practices that directly impact them. It also intentionally foregrounds mattering theory

with culturally relevant pedagogy, demonstrating how they are intertwined, and can be used together to better support students. This adds to the body of literature on effective teaching for Black adolescent boys.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have extensively studied the educational outcomes of Black students across various academic domains, particularly due to the persistence of achievement gaps between Black students and their white counterparts. (Brown, 2011; Ferguson, 2010; Reardon et al., 2014; Reardon et al., 2024). However, much of the theorizing on the academic outcomes of Black youth, neglects Black students' educational experiences particularly through their voices (Challenger et al., 2020; Conner et al., 2024; Jeynes, 2015; Kahne et al., 2022).

Centering the voices of Black boys, in work that directly pertains to them, offers stakeholders a nuanced perspective of their lived experiences and cultivates a stronger understanding of what is, and what is not, supportive for fostering their full potential while recognizing their complete humanity (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Focusing on their articulations of their experiences challenges harmful stereotypes and deficit framings that have shaped past academic discourse and research (Wright et al., 2009). The current study moves toward a humanizing approach to educational research (del Carmen Salazar, 2013) by recognizing the salience of Black students' lived experiences, racial realities, and perspectives in their education and incorporating these aspects into recommendations for education practice, theory, and policy (Bartolome, 1994).

Focusing on the experiences of students of color is critical because the ethnic and racial diversity of the United States (U.S.) has significantly increased over the past

decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). There has been greater ethnic-racial diversity growth in the youth population, compared to adults, which has led to increases of the diversity of the student population in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Educators in the U.S. have remained predominantly white despite the increasing racial and ethnic diversification of the country in recent decades (Irwin et al., 2024). In 2022, 56% of PreK-12 students identify as students of color, while 80% of educators identify as white (Irwin et al., 2024). This gap has become more pertinent in recent years as the racial diversity of the student body continues to grow at a faster rate than the racial diversity of teachers. The increasingly racially diverse population of PreK-12 students brings greater linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity to the classroom (Landsman & Lewis, 2023). Thus, the culture gap between the racial, cultural, and linguistic practices between teachers and students has become more significant (Irwin et al., 2024).

The culture gap between teachers and students is defined as the differential culture, race, and language experienced by predominantly white teachers and their increasingly diverse students (Carey et al., 2018). Research demonstrates that Black students earn higher standardized testing scores, have increased reading achievement, and their behaviors are evaluated more positively when their teachers match them in sociodemographic and sociocultural characteristics (Dee, 2004; Easton-Brooks et al., 2010, Easton-Brooks, 2021; Egalite et al., 2015). Beyond that, similar outcomes emerge when teachers practice culturally relevant methods to be more effective academically and build rapport with students who come from different backgrounds than themselves (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). Therefore, to accommodate the racially diverse student population and form

supportive relationships with their students it is important for teachers to mitigate the culture gap by practices that work to understand the cultures, values, and skills that students bring to the classroom and use them as a strength. Importantly, better addressing the education experience of racially and ethnically diverse students is not only driven by demographic changes but also a moral and ethical obligation to accommodate these students and ensure that their education is equitable. Every student deserves a high-quality education that affirms their identity, worth, and capabilities and meets their needs (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2018).

In the past few years, the importance of student well-being in school has been brought to light due to the multi-faceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prolonged periods of social isolation, remote learning challenges, and uncertainties surrounding health and safety during the pandemic led to increased stress, anxiety, and depression among students (Juvonen et al., 2021; Loades et al., 2020). Darling-Hammond and collaborators (2020) demonstrated how structural inequities in funding, resources, and access to high-quality education during the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected students of color and contributed to lower graduation rates, academic performance outcomes, and overall well-being. These outcomes pushed schools to take greater responsibility for student well-being by providing holistic support to address the challenges students face in a post-pandemic world.

In addition to the disruption and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, this period also involved heightened racial unrest due to the extrajudicial, police-imposed killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Millions across the U.S., and around the world, took to the streets protesting the systemic racism and enduring trauma imposed on Black communities (Buchanan et al., 2020).

During this time, the Black Lives Matter movement gained renewed urgency, and the people forced the institutions in the U.S. to confront the question: do Black Lives Matter (Walker et al., 2021)? Among activist demands of dismantling anti-Black policies and practices, this period of racial reckoning also ignited critical discussions of how we can better support Black youth in school and foster their mattering (Carey et al., 2022a; Carey et al., 2025).

Black students often face marginalization due to systemic inequities perpetuated by the educational system (e.g., mis/underrepresentation of Black history in the curriculum, decreased placement in advanced courses and gifted and talented programs, greater suspension, and expulsion rates; Bryan, 2022; Ford & Whiting, 2011; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Skiba et al., 2011; Sleeter, 2011). Recent research continues to show evidence of this marginalization, by demonstrating that Black students remain less likely to have access to advanced coursework and are overrepresented in disciplinary actions that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011). The school-to-prison pipeline is a systemic phenomenon resulting from the relationship between excessive exclusionary discipline practices, which disproportionately affect Black boys, and increased rates of school dropout, ultimately causing higher rates of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Desai & Abeita, 2017; Grace & Nelson, 2018; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003). These systemic biases often place Black students in environments that insufficiently support their academic and social development (Goff et al., 2016). Such systemic marginalization can result in Black students experiencing anti-mattering, a state where individuals feel insignificant, unworthy of attention, or believe that they do not matter (Flett, 2018a).

Many of the exclusionary practices in school stem from teachers and administrators perceiving Black boys as socially devious and academically disinterested (Bryan, 2022; Wright & Ford, 2019). These biased actions can further diminish disparities in academic outcomes due to Black students missing instruction time and feeling alienated from the school environment. A significant consequence of these practices illustrated by the school-to-prison pipeline, these punitive measures can also weaken Black boys' school attachment, lower their engagement, and strain their relationships with teachers (Skiba et al., 2011; Welsh, 2023).

These challenges are particularly consequential during adolescence, which is widely recognized as a transformative phase marked by rapid physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development (Burnett et al., 2011; Erikson, 1968; Green & Piel, 2010). It is during this time that individuals make rapid progress on forming their identities and self-concepts, which are influenced by a myriad of factors around them (Dusek et al., 1981; Marsh & Gouvernet, 1989). The development of a positive and strong self-concept plays an important role in shielding youth from the turbulence associated with this period (Carey et al., 2022a; Elliott, 2009). During this period, youth develop crucial socio-cognitive abilities such as recognizing the perspective of others, critical thinking skills, and abstract reasoning. These skills give them the tools and flexibility to conceptually explore and work towards solidifying their racial identities, as well as, questioning the nature of racism in contemporary and historical society (Brizio et al., 2015; Quintana & McKown, 2007). As adolescents navigate this period, they are closely tied to their school environment, thus, the interactions, relationships and school climate can play a role in the development of their self-concept and identity (Verhoeven et al., 2019). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981)

propose that experiencing a sense of mattering is a fundamental aspect of self-concept formation.

The Black Lives Matter movement has inspired educators and stakeholders to look deeper, beyond examining solely academic outcomes, and question whether Black students are experiencing a sense of mattering to their teachers and school (Carey et al., 2022a; Garza, 2016; Ginwright, 2015; Lebron, 2017; Love, 2019; Warren, 2018). Emphasizing the construct of mattering aligns with the ethical responsibility of schools to cultivate inclusive and supportive spaces by making students feel that them and their contributions are genuinely valued there, and their resulting well-being matters as much as their academic success.

This concern about students' perception of mattering intersects with the social-psychological concept of mattering, initially conceptualized by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), which centers on the perception that one is significant to others and has a meaningful presence in their lives. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) define mattering as the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego extension, which establishes a foundation for understanding mattering in both psychological and social contexts.

Building on this foundation, Elliott, Kao, and Grant (2004) proposed that feelings of mattering arise from interpersonal relationships through the experience of "awareness" (feeling recognized and acknowledged), "importance" (feeling that others care and invest in us), and "reliance" (feeling that others depend on us for support). While mattering is associated with self-esteem, social support, and belongingness, research indicates that it remains a distinct construct from these concepts (Demir et al., 2011; Elliott et al., 2004; Elliott, 2009; Flett, 2018a). This is important because

mattering uniquely captures the individual's perception of their significance and impact on others, which fosters motivation, resilience, and a sense of purpose in both educational and social contexts (Flett, 2018b).

Interpersonal mattering is crucial for social and academic outcomes, as it enhances resilience in school, boosts school engagement (e.g., increased participation in class, motivation to complete assignments, and positive interactions with peers), and promotes a positive self-concept (Elliott, 2009; Flett 2018b, Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Mattering is also negatively related to factors like depression, negative affect, rumination, and self-criticism (Flett et al., 2021; Matera et al., 2020). Teachers can reinforce students' mattering by building positive relationships and rapport with students (Wilson et al., 2010). Students of color experience different life experiences than white teachers thus, it is important for teachers to build an understanding of their experiences by engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy to bolster relationships with students of color.

The Black Lives Matter movement has also inspired calls for more culturally competent teachers who engage in transformative pedagogy that explicitly address racial inequities, and the diversity of our society, to work towards cultivating students' critical consciousness and fostering supportive and healing spaces for students who experience oppressive forces (Hamdan & Coloma, 2022). When educators fail to adopt culturally relevant practices and center white, middle-class experiences, they create a disconnect between the classroom environment and the lived experiences, ways of knowing, and cultural strengths of Black students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). It is crucial for Black children to see themselves valued in the academic environment. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the underrepresentation of

diversity within schools, demonstrated by the language, values, and identities of those in positions of power (i.e. the teachers, principals, and administrators; Milner, 2010). Thus, the cumulation of these aspects makes it challenging for Black students to reconcile academic success while maintaining their racial and cultural identity (Paris, 2012). Being culturally relevant and responsive to race does not mean that educators treat students inequitably, but rather these practices allow educators to recognize and address the systemic disadvantages that some students face, which helps to promote equity in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2022).

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore Black boys' voiced perceptions of the dynamics of their student-teacher-relationships through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and the following impact on their sense of mattering (how important, valued, and relied upon they feel). By centering the voices of students, this study aims to explore how their perceptions of the quality of interactions with teachers, and their practices, shapes their sense of mattering in the school environment. This research also seeks to examine the role of CRP in fostering equitable classrooms. Understanding how students perceive the implementation and effectiveness of CRP offers critical insights into its potential to enhance Black boys' educational experiences and outcomes.

A key dimension of this study is the exploration of how teachers can employ intentional strategies to affirm the sense of mattering among students of color. Given the systemic inequities that marginalize students of color in education, this research points toward practices and approaches that counter marginalization by appreciating the full potential of Black boys and thus, promoting equity. By addressing these

questions, the study provides critical insights for practitioners striving to create supportive environments for all children, as well as researchers in this field.

Significance

This work addresses the growing culture and teaching gap between the diverse student population and the predominately white educator workforce (Carey et al., 2018; Irwin et al., 2024). There is plentiful research on the achievement gap between students of color and their peers (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Herring et al., 2022; Merolla & Jackson, 2019; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Reardon et al., 2024) but a greater focus on students' experiences and well-being is needed. Mattering addresses an important aspect of interpersonal relationships that can bolster the overall well-being and resilience of students (Somers et al., 2022). Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to facilitate students' academic success, in addition to positively influencing diverse students' development, relationships, and experience with education (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, this work has moral and ethical significance as it aims to dismantle historic deficit narratives that marginalize and oppress Black boys.

Scope of the Work

Mattering continues to occupy a noteworthy space in public discourse, catalyzed by the social media hashtags, including #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName and their accompanying movements, which drew attention to both the racial and gendered violence inflicted upon Black individuals. In line with other scholars (Carey et al., 2022b; Crenshaw et al., 2015a; Crenshaw et al., 2015b; Morris, 2016; Evans-Winters et al., 2018), I recognize the educational and social implications of these movements, particularly for Black girls and young women whose unique

experiences of marginalization often remain overlooked. While this thesis focuses specifically on the experiences of Black boys within a school context that is urban characteristic (Milner, 2012), this choice does not disregard or diminish the impact of the compounded racial, gendered, and socioeconomic inequities that Black girls and Latine students face. These inequities manifest in the form of hyper-sexualization, disproportionate discipline, and a frequent lack of culturally affirming support in schools (Blake et al., 2011; Butler-Barnes et al., 2019; Evans-Winters et al., 2018; Leath et al., 2019; Morris, 2016; Smith-Purviance, 2021). By acknowledging the compounded social issues related to race and gender, I emphasize the critical need for educational systems that foster a sense of mattering for all students, particularly those with identities that are marginalized.

These injustices persist beyond the classroom, where the lives of Black girls and young women are further endangered by state-sanctioned violence and gendered stereotypes that lead to mistreatment and neglect. Examples of such include the case of Dajerria Becton, aggressively restrained at a pool party in Texas in 2015, and the unprovoked strip searches of Black girls in schools serve as stark reminders of the unique adversities that Black girls endure and resist (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2020; Love, 2019). This public resistance to violence extends to the police killings of Black women, including Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Breonna Taylor, and Black transgender women such as Nina Pop and Dominique “Rem'mie” Fells, highlighting the intersections of race and gender in ways that amplify the mistreatment faced by Black girls and women within the broader Black and LGBTQIA+ community (Chatelain & Asoka, 2015; Lindsey, 2018).

Although systemic biases are not exclusive to Black boys, they often receive heightened visibility due to the ways media, education policies, and societal narratives disproportionately spotlight their experiences (Brown & Kraehe, 2011). This visibility stems from stereotypes portraying Black boys as inherently threatening or as primary victims of systemic violence, thereby drawing more public and institutional attention to their challenges (Kohli et al., 2017; Noguera, 2008). Black girls, by contrast, face racial and gendered oppressions that are frequently silenced, their struggles compounded by disproportional discipline in schools and harmful stereotypes that dehumanize them (Crenshaw et al., 2015b). It is essential to address these layers of marginalization and resilience in the lives of Black girls within educational research and praxis, to advance the understanding of Black youth's experiences in society and schools.

This study's focus on Black adolescent boys in high school aims to shed light on their experiences within educational environments. Particularly, I am interested in formulating ways to identify and support positive teacher-student relationships and students' perception of mattering. The aim is to address Black boys' experiences of mattering in a context where their visibility does not necessarily guarantee mattering, support, or equity. By centering on Black boys, this research contributes to a broader, inclusive understanding of the diverse experiences of youth of color and highlights the need for educational experiences that affirm all marginalized students.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides an exploration of pre-existing research that informs my study by looking at the intersection of CRP, teacher-student relationships, and mattering on the experience of Black boys in education contexts. The review begins by examining Ladson-Billings' foundational work on CRP. This section describes how CRP influences various students' outcomes, particularly for Black boys in secondary education. Building on the foundations of CRP, I transition to the concept of cultural competence, exploring how educators' ability to understand and integrate diverse cultures shapes their capacity to create effective learning environments. This section demonstrates the need for alignment between pedagogy and students' cultural contexts to address systemic inequities. Following this, I explore the importance of teacher-student relationships, emphasizing studies that show how positive and supportive relationships are built and result in academic and socio-emotional well-being for students.

The next section expands on the above by addressing the cultural differences in education and communication, examining the manifestation of the cultural gap between predominantly white teachers and diverse students. This literature explores how the culture and teaching gap affects various student outcomes and experiences in school. Finally, I discuss the concept of mattering, particularly for Black boys, and evidence of how culturally relevant teaching practices can foster a sense of mattering in educational settings. By exploring these constructs and entwining related research,

this review identifies gaps in the literature and situates my study's contribution among previous literature. Thus, this review establishes the foundation for the study and highlights the significance of exploring these constructs together.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

CRP is an asset pedagogy which are teaching approaches that view the teaching and learning of children, particularly those with identities that have been historically minoritized through a strengths-based lens. They do so by affirming their knowledge, strengths, languages, values, and beliefs and embedding them in their education. Ladson-Billings, the pioneer of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), drew on the findings from her pivotal Dreamkeepers study, a longitudinal qualitative study that identified commonalities among highly effective teachers of Black students, as well as the foundational pedagogical theorizing of Bartolome's (1994) humanizing pedagogy and Freire's (1968) anti-banking model and critical pedagogy, to delineate a framework for CRP. Freire's (1968) anti-banking model posits that education should go beyond viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge, it should recognize and honor their full humanity, engaging them as active participants in the learning process. This perspective, along with humanizing students by using their reality, history, and perspectives (Bartolome, 1994) underpins Ladson-Billings' CRP.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) CRP involves three constructs for analysis: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Academic success posits that teachers accept nothing less than the highest level of academic excellence from all their students and see it as their responsibility to help their students achieve this. Cultural competence involves teachers and educators being aware of and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of their students so

that students can maintain their cultural identity while also aligning with academics. Critical consciousness goes a step further by encouraging students to critically analyze and question the systemic practices that produce and maintain social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2022) posits that CRP uses students' culture to transcend the prescriptive ideologies and structures that are premised on normative belief systems.

Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the importance of teachers playing the role of "warm demanders" in education, based on the foundational work of Kleinfeld (1975) and Lipman (1995). Warm demanders are teachers who hold the belief that all students have the potential to succeed academically, and they view it as their responsibility to support students in reaching that potential. To be a "warm demander", teachers must be personal and caring towards their students, while also holding them to high academic standards (Kleinfeld, 1975). Ladson-Billings (1995) expands this concept to emphasize that to be an effective teacher for Black students, is one who demonstrates care and high expectations but must recognize the cultural knowledge that students bring to the classroom and use their ways of knowing to scaffold their learning. In her Dreamkeepers book, Ladson-Billings (2022) re-names this approach as a "conductor" which emphasizes the teacher's ability to orchestrate students' success, however, for consistency with existing literature on the pedagogical approach I will refer to it as "warm demander" throughout this study.

The "warm demander" approach contrasts with deficit thinking, which undermines diverse students' cultural knowledge. Valencia (2010) defines deficit thinking as "the idea that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies, such deficits manifest in limited intellectual abilities,

linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior" (p. 6). Valencia's articulation of deficit thinking highlights the harmful assumptions embedded in deficit thinking that can inhibit educators' effectiveness. Dominant narratives that portray Black culture as a deficit can lead to teachers subconsciously treating aspects of Black culture, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), hip-hop, and fashion, as deficits rather than strengths (Broughton, 2017; Champion, 2012; Ford, 2019). Ladson-Billings (1995) posits that culturally relevant teachers' belief in the academic success of all students, including Black boys and young men, reflects a departure from deficit and stereotypical narratives.

Research has indicated that a culturally relevant approach is correlated with positive attitudes about school (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), increased motivation and achievement (White et al., 2018), improved attendance, and lower suspension rates (Luter et al., 2017; Piñedo et al., 2021) for students of color. Culturally relevant curricula are also associated with improved academic outcomes among students of color, leading to the attainment of higher GPAs, higher graduation, and college attendance rates (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Piñedo et al., 2021). This further reinforces what education scholars theorize, that including curricula that connects students' life experiences and identity to their education helps to facilitate their success in academia and other aspects of life (Sleeter, 2011).

Research has demonstrated that culturally relevant approaches are particularly impactful for Black boys in secondary education. Studies suggest that CRP fosters positive attitudes toward school, increased motivation, and academic resilience among Black male students (Brooms, 2016; Kirkland, 2015). For example, Brooms (2016) reported that high school Black boys in urban settings demonstrated higher levels of

academic engagement and school attachment when curriculum and instruction were intentionally aligned with their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Fletcher and Hines (2022) found that when an educational program was rebranded so that Black boys see themselves represented in the curriculum and receive affirming support from culturally competent teachers, they are more likely to exhibit academic engagement and see their identity as aligned with the program.

Noguera (2008) observed that addressing the cultural dissonance between Black boys in schools by incorporating materials relevant to students' cultural contexts can enhance their sense of belonging and decrease disciplinary issues, which often disproportionately affect Black boys. CRP has been shown to increase engagement and self-perceptions among Black boys in STEM subjects, helping to address racial and gender inequities in science and technology fields (Sanchez Tapia et al., 2017). Corkin et al. (2020) found that Black male students who participated in culturally relevant STEM programs reported stronger science-oriented self-concepts and aspirations, reinforcing the idea that a curriculum grounded in students' cultural backgrounds promotes academic achievement and self-efficacy.

Sleeter (2011) researched the social and academic value of CRP in elementary and high schools. According to Sleeter's (2011) curriculum research, textbook publishers of the 1970s and 1980s made efforts to remove racial stereotypes from the elementary curriculum, but in the 1990s there was a shift to focusing on standards accountability which caused the efforts for cultural inclusivity to subside. Sleeter (2011) noted that the common curriculum includes minimal aspects of Black, Latine, and Indigenous culture and history and Eurocentric narratives still overwhelmingly dominate the curriculum. Although Black communities are somewhat represented,

their presence in the curriculum remains limited. Kirkland (2015) and Nelson (2016) emphasized that an inclusive curriculum helps Black boys develop a positive racial identity, which has been linked to stronger academic orientations and resilience in the face of systemic educational inequities.

Hughes et al. (2006) highlighted in a meta-analysis, that cultural socialization facilitates children's knowledge about their ethnic-racial group and increases their positive in-group attitudes. Increasing the emphasis placed on teaching youth about history, civil rights, and discrimination is correlated with children having a more racial-central attitude (Hughes et al., 2006). Attributing the outcomes of their racial group to external sources, such as systems of racism, increases children's self-esteem (Hughes et al., 2006). Youth developing a robust racial-ethnic identity and high self-esteem has been shown to increase their school orientation and academic success (Hughes et al., 2009). When children see their race as being engaged in education, they are more likely to demonstrate greater academic achievement (Hughes et al., 2009). The work of Hines et al. (2020) and Nelson (2016) reinforce that when Black boys view their cultural identity as integral to their learning experiences, they demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement and positive attitudes toward education.

While the positive effects of CRP on academic outcomes are well-documented, there is no exploration of how CRP impacts Black boys' perceptions of mattering specifically through interpersonal teacher-student relationships. Ladson-Billings (2014) emphasizes the iterative nature of CRP in order to adapt to the dynamic and evolving nature of culture and the world. Thus, it is important to consistently re-evaluate if this CRP supports the needs of today's diverse and evolving youth, to work

towards fostering their full potential. In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the heightened visibility of how systemic racism affects Black communities, it is essential to support and affirm the mattering experiences of Black students in school by continually revising asset-based pedagogies like CRP to better meet their needs.

Cultural Competence

Culture is the dynamic and ever-evolving system of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, behaviors, symbols, and traditions that shape and define the way of life for a group of people (Wyer et al., 2013). It is the collective experience of a community, cultivated and transmitted through social learning, communication, and symbolic interaction across generations (Birukou et al., 2013; Yosso, 2005). Culture encompasses both the tangible and intangible aspects of human existence, from material artifacts and customs to spiritual and intellectual frameworks (Geertz, 2017). It serves as a guiding force for identity, conditioning behaviors, and shaping worldviews, while also providing the means for individuals and groups to interact and adapt within their environment (Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

Educators, as well as students, exist in the context of their own culture as well as the society they inhabit (Banks, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is impossible to engage in culture-blind teaching, as the identities of educators contain their culture, subjective knowledge, and experience of the world (Cadenas et al., 2021). Cultural competence for educators refers to the ability to understand, respect, and effectively interact with students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2018). It involves being aware of one's own culture and the way it infiltrates worldview, gaining

knowledge about different cultures, and developing skills to adapt teaching methods and communication styles to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

The concept of cultural competence in education is largely influenced by Gay, in her pivotal work Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice (2018). Gay developed the framework for what is known as culturally responsive teaching (CRT). She emphasized the need for educators to incorporate students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and perspectives into their teaching practices to make learning more effective and inclusive.

Gay (2013) posits that students learn more effectively when they can connect their classroom experiences to the real world. When students relate what they are taught to their own lives, education becomes more meaningful, and their motivation to succeed increases (Gay, 2013). In general, when teachers are responsive to students' needs and what they bring to the classroom, students feel valued, capable of learning, and more engaged with both the learning environment and the materials (Abacioglu et al., 2019; Gay, 2013; Nieto, 2004).

Gay (2018) emphasized that embedding cultural competence in teaching involves designing relevant curricula and utilizing instructional methods that make learning more effective by addressing students' cultural contexts and ways of knowing. True cultural competence goes beyond surface-level inclusions of cultural celebrations or tokenizing a handful of famous Black heroes for Black History Month (King & Brown, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Woodson, 2016). Engaging in only these misconceptions of culturally competent education can further marginalize diverse history and culture in instruction, lower academic expectations for students,

disregard the lived culture of the school and classroom, and neglect power dynamics (Sleeter, 2018).

A historical feature of the cultural competence component of culturally relevant pedagogy is cultural synchronization. Cultural synchronization is when teachers alter their communication styles, and participation structures to resemble students' own culture. Erikson and Mohatt (1981) found that teachers who employed these culturally congruent behaviors were most effective in communicating with students who hold marginalized identities. Irvine (2003) found that a lack of cultural synchronization between Black students and teachers inhibits their school achievement. Trawick-Smith (2010) found that teachers who reflected the behaviors of a student's cultural background enhanced their ease in adjusting to a new culture.

Hamdan and Coloma (2022) identified three key themes related to determining teacher's cultural competence; the first theme, recognizing culture, involves understanding students' cultural backgrounds, the differences between school and home environments, and diverse learning styles to make learning meaningful and inclusive. Their second theme, utilizing resources for teaching and learning, emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant instructional materials, adaptive pedagogy, and equitable assessment practices to engage diverse learners. The final theme, creating a sense of community, highlights the significance of fostering positive student-teacher relationships, building inclusive classroom environments, and maintaining strong home-school connections to ensure that students feel valued and supported in their educational experiences.

Research demonstrates that teachers' socioeconomic status (SES) can affect their cultural competence, influencing how they behave in the classroom, their

teaching methods, their interactions with students, and their ability to integrate culturally relevant practices daily (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Additionally, the SES of students in a school impacts teachers' behaviors and the degree of cultural competence they apply in the classroom. The literature frequently highlights educators' deficit beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse students, as well as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Unsurprisingly, these deficit beliefs are considered the primary obstacle to implementing culturally relevant practices and developing teachers' cultural competence (Dani & Harrison, 2021).

Culturally competent educators typically engage in cultural self-reflection, examining how their upbringing influences their teaching practices (Lindo et al., 2020). Additionally, they acquire cultural knowledge by learning about the cultures represented in their classrooms, respecting student values, and viewing differences as strengths rather than challenges (Lindo et al., 2020). Finally, they implement this knowledge by using skills, strategies, and teaching practices that effectively support students from diverse backgrounds (Lindo et al., 2020). While the pre-existing literature provides the conceptual foundation for cultural competence in the classroom, missing from the literature is work that explores what cultural competence looks like from students' perspective.

Teacher and Student Relationships

The importance of student and teacher relationships is emphasized by developmental literature which emphasizes a child's proximity to school and the influence that it has on learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The concept of proximal processes is a key element of bio-ecological systems theory. These processes refer to the regular, ongoing activities and interactions an individual

engages in (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For students at school, proximal processes involve repeated interactions with teachers, classmates, school administrators, and staff. Since these proximities are repeated and ongoing, they have a lasting effect on youth development. Another key tenet of ecological models is that individual development is influenced by both micro- and macrosystems. In the context of education, these theories suggest that differences in children's developmental outcomes can be understood through their immediate learning environments and broader societal systems. Interactions within the school environment, such as peer relationships, curricula, and teacher-student dynamics, contribute to this process, as well (Piñedo et al., 2021). In addition to micro-system interactions, children's developmental outcomes are also shaped by aspects of the macrosystem, which includes "institutional patterns of culture, such as the economy, customs, and bodies of knowledge" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 37; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Marjoribanks, 2002). For adolescents, strong relationships with teachers are associated with improved connections with classmates and other educators, as well as increased school engagement, perseverance, interest in learning, and future academic ambitions (Camacho et al., 2017; Smetana et al., 2006). Furthermore, positive interactions with teachers can provide adolescents with a sense of adult support, which plays a crucial role in promoting their social and emotional well-being (Smetana et al., 2006).

Hamre and Pianta (2001) found that positive teacher-student relationships in kindergarten were associated with higher student grades, standardized test scores, and positive work habits in upper elementary and middle school. Thus, the relationships that children form with their teachers can predict later academic and social outcomes. Particularly for Black boys, teacher-student conflict was negatively related to later

academic and behavior adjustments when other factors were controlled for (Tucker et al., 2010). Roorda et al. (2011) found that positive relationships between teachers and students enhanced students' engagement in the classroom. They also suggested that increased student engagement contributes to higher achievement levels, particularly among students from marginalized backgrounds. This research demonstrates that early relationships with teachers have lasting effects on children's development.

Nelson's work on relational teaching with Black boys underscores the importance of supportive and affirming teacher-student relationships for Black boys specifically. Nelson (2016) emphasizes that relational teaching focused on establishing trust, respect, and mutual understanding, empowers Black boys to engage more fully in academic settings, promoting positive educational and social outcomes. His research highlights how intentional relationship-building fosters a sense of mattering and belonging, which is crucial for Black boys who may experience marginalization within the school system. Incorporating these relational approaches contributes to Black boys' academic success and personal development, further reinforcing the enduring impact of early, positive teacher-student relationships.

Mentorship and support from caring adults, such as teachers, are crucial in fostering positive socio-emotional outcomes, in addition to academic success, for Black boys. Foundational research from Masten et al. (1990) and Werner (1997) demonstrated that when youth experience at least one meaningful connection with a caring adult figure they are more protected from the adverse consequences of being placed at risk and thus, develop stronger resilience when adapting to their circumstances. For Black boys, who may face significant challenges in the educational system, having a mentor who they matter to can make a significant difference in their

academic and personal success. Research from Nelson (2016) supported this by finding that mentorship and affirming teacher-student connections help Black boys navigate educational environments and foster both academic and socio-emotional success. Tucker et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of caring relationships in schools, noting that Black boys who felt that they mattered to their teachers were more likely to succeed academically. This underscores the importance of providing mentorship and support for Black boys in the educational system. Although teacher-student relationships are shown to improve academic and social outcomes, little research explores these outcomes from the qualitative perspectives of Black boys. By fostering these relationships through CRP, educators can help these students feel that they matter and are valued members of the school community.

Birch and Ladd (1997) have defined closeness (i.e., “degree of warmth and open communication that exists between a teacher and a child” p. 63) as one of the key attributes of a positive teacher-student relationship. Their research suggests that close teacher-student relationships are instrumental in supporting students’ learning and academic success because they provide them with a "secure base" to explore their school environment. When students develop a secure relationship with their teacher, they are more likely to have a positive attitude toward school. As such, developing open communication between teachers and students also fosters student engagement in their learning environment. While this research provides important foundational insights to the effect of a robust teacher-student relationship, it is based on early childhood.

Research indicates that the quality of the child-teacher relationship improves when there is ethnoracial matching, where students are paired with teachers who share

their race or ethnicity (Easton-Brooks, 2021), as this shared background fosters a stronger connection (Alexander et al., 1987). Additionally, students are more likely to feel attached to the school when their teachers share the same ethno-racial identity (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Johnson et al., 2001; Voelkl, 2012). Teachers with similar ethnic backgrounds tend to have a deeper understanding of their student's social and cultural experiences, making them better equipped to accurately interpret classroom behaviors. They are also more likely to meet the developmental needs of younger students with whom they share these identities. This research points to the importance of mitigating the culture gap between the predominately white teacher population and the growing diverse student population. Students without ethnoracial matches with their teachers can face further marginalization in schools because of this. There are gaps in research on how the CRP framework can guide strong relationship development for teachers and students from different cultures.

Racial Differences in Education and Communication

A significant amount of research has examined the relationship between youth of color and academic achievement, revealing evidence that structural oppression and systemic racism are significant contributors to the racial achievement gap (Dee, 2004; Hines et al., 2020; Howard, 2008; Jeynes, 2015). Much of the early research on the achievement gap located the locus of this problem in the speech and language interactions of teachers and students, but it is important to consider the macro social context in these theories as well (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One early explanation of the achievement gap is the cultural difference hypothesis proposed by Ramirez and Castaneda (1974). This hypothesis posits that the differences between children's home environment and school contribute to lower academic performance. This is

particularly salient for children of color because American schools are typically "white" and Western-oriented, reflecting Eurocentric cultural norms, values, and practices (Tanner, 2017). Western values are reinforced by the racial identities of teachers, the content of the curricula, the way language is used in schools, and broader institutional values and policies (Ladson-Billings, 2022). The cultural difference hypothesis highlights how the contrast between a student's home culture and school culture creates conflicts that can hinder learning. However, when there is congruence between a child's home culture and school culture, children of color are more likely to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (Ladson-Billings, 2022).

Villegas (1991) expanded on this hypothesis by demonstrating the role of language use, and misunderstandings that stem from such, in mediating the school-student culture gap. This is particularly relevant to Black students due to their use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Teachers who are influenced by deficit views often correct students' use of AAVE, perceiving it as "incorrect" rather than recognizing it as a legitimate dialect of English (Harris & Schroeder, 2013). This reflects a deficit narrative rooted in anti-Black racism, rather than a strengths-based approach that values the cultural and linguistic knowledge that students bring to the classroom.

Ledesma and Calderon (2015) found that teacher attitudes often mirror broader ideologies, such as color blindness, meritocracy, and post-racialism which treat racial differences as an individual issue rather than a systemic one. When schools fail to recognize racism, like biases toward non-standard dialects such as AAVE, this inadvertently reinforces Black culture as a deficit. Which leads to a hierarchy of cultures, mirroring white supremacy.

Research suggests that students whose home communication styles are reflected in their school environment have greater advantages in learning (Ladson-Billings, 2022). These students apply what they know about language in the classroom. In contrast, students whose communication style differs from that of their school, tend to be misunderstood when applying prior knowledge to the classroom (Villegas, 1991). This applies to their schooling experience generally, as language is central to communication and knowledge transfer across subjects. Many teachers are not trained to understand how communication styles influence the ways their students learn or how to adapt their teaching methods to students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Clark & Anderson, 2021).

Culture Gap Between Teachers and Students

The culture gap between teachers and students refers to the differential culture, race, and language experienced by predominantly white teachers and their increasingly diverse students (Carey et al., 2018). This gap is also shaped by the different experiences, norms, and values that white teachers have that conflict with the experiences, norms, and values of their ethnically and racially diverse students.

Although we live in a post-Jim Crow and civil rights era, people of color still face greater social and economic disadvantages (e.g., employment discrimination, housing segregation, income disparities, incarceration inequity, healthcare disparities, and education inequity) compared to their white counterparts (Ajilore, 2020; Blankenship et al., 2018; Geruso, 2012; Solomon et al., 2021). Power and privilege continue to be afforded to white groups and their experiences, which are often regarded as the societal norm (Khalifa, 2016). Students of color are more likely to have experienced poverty, or financial struggles, than their white teachers (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The social and economic inequities faced by people of color are maintained and subtly reinforced by systemic racism and discriminatory practices. Racism operates in the lives of people of color in pervasive ways, which can affect their social experiences, economic opportunities, health outcomes, education access, and overall quality of life (Harris, 1993; Massey & Denton, 1993). This happens through both overt and subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice, as well as through institutional policies and practices that appear neutral on the surface but disproportionately disadvantage people of color (Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

These extend to the education system as children of color often face marginalization due to systemic inequities perpetuated by education (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Children of color are disproportionately more likely to attend underfunded schools with overcrowded classrooms that have high dropout rates, low graduation rates, lower standardized test scores, a greater presence of underqualified or first-year teachers, and high levels of teacher turnover (Irwin et al., 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Milner, 2015b; Reardon, 2024). These facts contextualize the way that race and culture intersect with life experiences and inequity. Demonstrating the likelihood that children of color have vastly different life experiences than white children, thus, they enter the classroom with different types of knowledge.

White, middle class, values and culture being treated as the norm can foster misunderstandings between teachers and students that lead to students of color being suspended and expelled at higher rates (Monroe, 2005; Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Gregory & Mosely, 2004). The subconscious biases with which teachers approach their students can also lead to this disparity (Owens, 2022). Black boys are

disproportionately affected by systemic racism in schools, which manifests in practices such as disproportionate discipline and school exclusion, as well as through interpersonal interactions like racial stereotypes and low expectations from teachers, culminating in decreasing Black boys' connection to school (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al, 2011). This racism also creates relational tension between them and actors in power, such as peers, teachers, and administrators (Stevenson, 2008).

Evidence across outcomes of many teacher-education programs shows that white educators are prepared with the conceptual tools to teach from a culturally relevant perspective but lack the practical tools to deeply embed culture in the classroom (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024). Community experience has been shown to help white educators gain the practical tools needed to implement cultural relevancy in their specific school context (Adams, 2022). The importance of educators' self-reflection and examination of the authoritative quality of their role in schools, consciously or unconsciously, and how that may further marginalize students of color has been emphasized in producing long-lasting outcomes from CRP professional development programs (Luguetti & Oliver, 2020).

Mattering

The concept of interpersonal mattering suggests that individuals can perceive their presence and actions as having a meaningful impact on others and society (Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). It involves recognizing one's worth, feeling important, and having the ability to positively influence their environment (Prilleltensky et al., 2023). On the other hand, the experience of "anti-mattering" (Flett, 2018a) can lead to feelings of marginalization, subordination, or

being overlooked within institutions, communities, or broader societal contexts (Paradisi et al., 2024; Schlossberg, 1989).

According to Elliott, Kao, and Grant (2004), mattering emerges in relationships where individuals feel "noticed" (i.e., acknowledged and seen), "valued" (i.e., supported by others), or "relied upon" (i.e., trusted for support). This sense of interpersonal mattering is crucial for both social and psychological well-being, enhancing resilience, promoting engagement, and fostering a positive self-concept (Elliott, 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Carey (2019, 2020) developed a mattering framework specifically tailored to the experiences of Black boys and young men. He identified three forms of mattering: marginal, partial, and comprehensive mattering. Marginal mattering refers to “the type of baseline, minimal recognition that implies their insignificance, as signaled by individuals, such as peers and educators, and institutions, like schools, around them” (Carey, 2019, p. 376). Carey and collaborators (2022) found that when teachers were unaware of the challenges Black boys faced at home and failed to acknowledge those experiences, the students felt what he termed marginal mattering.

Partial mattering is defined as “the significance Black boys and young men can infer about themselves based on how others (e.g., educators and the general public) selectively value certain talents and attributes they embody in ways that leave racist systems unchallenged” (Carey, 2019, p. 378). This selective valuing of Black boys, often emphasizing stereotypical traits such as athletes and entertainers, reinforces harmful stereotypes and shapes how Black boys perceive their racial identity in relation to their academic alignment. Finally, comprehensive mattering represents a “radically imagined relational approach to understanding, interacting with, and

conceiving of the fullness of mattering of Black boys and young men" (Carey, 2019, p. 383).

Comprehensive mattering emphasizes the need for the adaptation of schools to be an environment where Black boys are holistically valued. The treatment of Black boys in school settings tends to reinforce marginal and partial mattering. Carey's (2019) framework urges educators to reimagine how they engage with Black boys by humanizing them and promoting comprehensive mattering. This shift would allow Black boys to envision their future selves positively and engage in critical action that challenges systemic racism. Comprehensive mattering requires educators to recognize and prioritize the significance of Black boys' life experiences in the broader goal of educating them as holistic humans.

Experiencing a sense of mattering in school is closely linked to how educational institutions value and integrate diverse ethno-racial identities. When students see their identities, experiences, and backgrounds reflected in both the curriculum and the educators who are teaching them, they are more likely to feel that their identity is valued within the school environment (Iweuno et al., 2024). This sense of mattering fosters and strengthens their educational environment, reinforcing the notion that they matter not only as individuals but as members of an academic community (Nelson et al., 2020). For Black boys, seeing their identities positively represented in their school's practices and curricula promotes their school efficacy, academic development, and overall well-being (Ellis et al., 2018).

The absence of mattering can have serious consequences for Black boys, both academically and personally. Research has shown that students who do not feel that they matter are more likely to experience academic difficulties, drop out of school, and

engage in risky behaviors (Lemon & Watson, 2011). These negative outcomes are often compounded by the systemic racism that Black boys encounter in the educational system. However, when Black boys feel that they matter, they are more likely to succeed academically and avoid these negative outcomes. This is supported by research showing that mattering is associated with higher academic achievement, lower levels of loneliness, and greater psychosocial well-being (Somers et al., 2022). By fostering a sense of mattering through CRP, educators can help to reduce the risk of negative outcomes for Black boys and promote their overall success.

The school environment plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of mattering among students. Particularly, teachers have a significant impact on whether students feel that they matter. As noted by Tucker et al. (2010), Black boys who felt that they mattered to their teachers were more likely to succeed academically. This sense of mattering was fostered through caring relationships with teachers who took the time to listen to the students and support their academic and personal growth. The importance of teacher-student relationships is further highlighted by Somers and Piliawsky (2004), who found that students who participated in a program that provided tutoring and supplemental enrichment were less likely to drop out of school. The success of this program was attributed to the close relationships that students developed with their tutors, who made them feel that they mattered. This finding underscores the importance of creating a school environment where Black boys feel supported and valued by their teachers.

Tuitt, Haynes, and Stewart (2018) argue that transforming classrooms, that have been traditionally oriented toward white groups, to make Black Lives Matter requires intentional praxis that includes voice and lived experience, interdisciplinary

and diverse content, and identity-affirming learning environments. These principles are crucial in creating an educational setting where Black boys feel that they matter. When their cultural backgrounds are reflected in the curriculum, Black boys are more likely to engage with the material and see themselves as integral members of the school community.

Gaps in the Literature

Significant research has explored the culture and teaching gap, which is defined as the cultural and racial divergence between predominantly white, middle-class teachers and their increasingly diverse students, which can hinder school success due to a misalignment of values, norms, and expectations between these groups (Carey et al., 2018). There is research that demonstrates that this gap is related to academic outcomes like; student engagement, reduced perceptions of support, and academic performance (Fletcher & Hines, 2022, Nelsen, 2021). I am interested in exploring how this gap influences students' perceptions of mattering and what culturally relevant teaching practices teachers employ to mediate this gap between themselves and their students, leading to the fostering of positive relationships.

Currently, no literature explicitly addresses the relationships between the constructs that I am exploring in this study. After employing a variety of related search terms there was no research found that explored how teachers use culturally relevant teaching methods to mitigate the culture gap between them and their students, and the effect that has on student's perception of mattering in the classroom. Most of the pre-existing research in similar studies investigates higher education (Ewing Goodman, 2024; Salazar, 2024; Schriver, 2023; Huerta & Fishman, 2014), examines similar but distinct constructs to mattering, like belonging (Clarke et al., 2024), and does not

incorporate student voice through interviews but rather analyzes school curriculum (Boss et al., 2021) or teachers (Garte & Kronen, 2021). This study broadens what is known on this topic by bringing in the voices and perspectives of Black boys who are directly impacted by these constructs. While prior research has explored CRP, cultural competence, and teacher-student relationships independently, no studies to date have examined their combined impact on Black boys' perceptions of mattering in secondary schools. By doing so this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers, stakeholders, and policy makers can improve the education experience of Black boys, and other marginalized youth, in secondary school contexts. This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining how culturally relevant pedagogy, through students' interpretations of interpersonal interactions between themselves and educators, affects their perception of their mattering within the secondary school context.

Chapter 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three key theoretical approaches: the social psychology theory of mattering (Elliot et al., 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), Carey's (2019) framework for Black boy mattering, and Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). I use these theories together to explore Black boys' perspectives of how teachers incorporate aspects of CRP to bridge the cultural gap. I explore how aspects of CRP alongside stronger relationships with teachers influence Black boys' perception of their mattering in the classroom. Together these frameworks form a cohesive approach that cross-pollinates CRP with the construct of mattering to positively impact the development and educational experiences of Black boys.

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) first introduced the concept of mattering into the field of social psychology, positing that it is an implicit component for shaping the self-concept. Their definition of mattering elucidates how individuals make meaning of themselves in relation to others. They identified five components that make up the perception of mattering which are receiving attention, feeling important, feeling needed, feeling appreciated, and feeling that others invest time, energy, and effort into helping and supporting them.

Elliot and collaborators (2004) extended this work by further operationalizing the construct of mattering. They proposed that "Mattering is the extent to which we make a difference in the world around us" (p. 339). Elliot and collaborators theorized that mattering emerges when an individual perceives; awareness (others attending to

them), importance (others investing themselves in them), or reliance (looking to them for resources). These dimensions furthered the understanding of mattering as a psycho-social construct.

Carey (2019) built upon the construct of mattering by providing a framework for understanding how Black boys perceive their mattering in educational contexts. Carey's (2019) framework expands the concept of mattering into three distinct categories: partial, marginal, and comprehensive mattering. His framework describes how stereotypes and biases constrain the most common perceptions of mattering for Black boys in school, and how these low-level perceptions of mattering hinder them from robustly inferring their holistic mattering. Marginal mattering occurs when "social and educational practices criminalize, overlook, and push Black boys toward academic failure" (p. 376). Partial mattering arises when "only select skills and abilities, such as athletic prowess, are nurtured and celebrated" (p. 378). Comprehensive mattering "embraces the entirety of Black boys' authentic selves, including their unique interests, latent talents, and inherent value" (p. 383).

Carey's framework was inspired by the Black Lives Matter social justice movement, which launched in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (Carey, 2019; Garza, 2016; Lebron, 2017). This movement has drawn attention to and inspired pushback against the police brutality and systemic racism that disproportionately affect Black communities. The movement brought to light the importance of Black lives, and by extension Black students, mattering in the context of historical marginalization (Carey et al., 2021). Carey's (2019) mattering framework critically examines how Black boys realistically matter in school settings and bridges the Black Lives Matter movement with psycho-

social conceptualizations of mattering. The goal of this framework is to advocate for an educational future where Black boys can fully and strongly infer a sense of mattering within their school environments.

This reimagined future for Black boys' education involves affirming their holistic identities, fostering supportive relationships with educators, and promoting their academic success. These concepts can be cross-pollinated with aspects of asset pedagogies, which are educational approaches that recognize, value, and build on students' strengths, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds. A few key asset pedagogies that include aspects of mattering are engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In this study, I utilized elements of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to explore how teachers build relationships with Black boys that affirm their sense of mattering. I chose to focus on CRP because Ladson-Billings' (1995) landmark article has had a prolific influence on education research, curriculum, and professional development (Paris, 2012). Ladson-Billings' work established the foundational concepts for subsequent asset pedagogies such as Paris's Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012). I have also oriented my study around CRP because it remains highly influential in current educational practices. CRP encompasses core elements that align with the constructs explored in my study, which aim to understand student perceptions of how teachers build relationships with Black boys in ways that affirm their mattering by valuing their identities, experiences, and contributions. Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study that examined the qualities and techniques of several exemplar teachers who were successful, influential, and

well-liked by Black students, their parents, and school administrators. Her framework for CRP is based on the similarities between these teachers' pedagogical excellence with Black students. CRP rests on three main propositions; academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

The first proposition, academic success, refers to the cultivation and reinforcement of all students' academic achievement that culturally relevant (CR) teachers promote by leveraging their cultural strengths, and personal interests, and providing equitable support when needed. To do this, teachers must inherently believe that all students are capable of academic success and see it as their responsibility to help them reach it. This belief represents a divergence from "marginal mattering" which aligns with stereotypes of academic inability and dismisses Black boys' intelligence, consequently propelling them into cycles of school failure. For teachers to create conditions that foster all students' academic success they must value students' skills and abilities, and actively recognize and support their full potential. Teachers' recognition of Black students' inherent worth and capabilities, goes beyond surface-level support; it involves a deeper commitment to each student's success, reflecting a sense of responsibility that motivates teachers to support students holistically. When Black students are recognized in this way, they experience a sense of inherent worth and value, which are aspects of mattering, fostered by knowing they are seen as capable and worthy contributors in the classroom. This sense of mattering results from the teachers' actions, support, and respect that they extend to each student. When teachers see the unique qualities that Black boys bring to the classroom, as assets, not deficits, and believe Black boys are capable of academic excellence they cultivate an environment where Black boys perceive that they matter.

The second proposition of CRP is cultural competence which involves teachers working to understand and maintain students' cultural integrity in the context of school. CR teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning and scaffolding knowledge. A popular way to do this is Hip Hop pedagogy, which uses Hip Hop (a prominent element of Black culture) to teach subjects such as English, history, and even science and math. Hip Hop utilizes an element of popular culture that Black students possess knowledge of to scaffold academic skills and align the classroom with their culture (Emdin, 2016; Graves et al., 2020; Love, 2015). The school environment is framed around white culture in subtle and normalized ways, thus intentionally bringing aspects of other cultures disrupts the status quo (Sleeter, 2018; Yosso, 2005). When teachers develop cultural competence, they reinforce the value of Black culture and find places to center such culture in the classroom. Placing importance on Black culture allows Black students to bring internal resources to the education space, reinforcing that their lived experiences, current knowledge, and history matter to and belong in their learning environment.

The third proposition of CRP is critical consciousness. Critical consciousness was first introduced by Freire (1968), as "conscientização". He defined it as enabling students to perceive and challenge the social, political, and economic contradictions in their lives (Freire, 1968). In CRP, critical consciousness moves beyond individual achievement and prepares students to critique the systems, structures, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. This aspect of CRP aligns with comprehensive mattering because it critiques the systems of oppression that foster partial and marginal mattering. By fostering critical consciousness, Black students can understand how the inequity of Black communities is systemically reinforced by larger

structures rather than individual choices and cultural deficits. This challenges the stereotypes and biases that inform experiences of partial and marginal mattering. Developing critical consciousness not only helps students recognize these systemic barriers, but also equips them with the skills to critique the social conditions that define how and when they matter. This critical lens allows them to see and question why certain aspects of their identity are valued while others are overlooked or devalued.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) landmark work on culturally relevant pedagogy, alongside the related concept of culturally responsive teaching (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Gay, 2000), have become deeply embedded in both educational research, teacher education programs, and classroom curriculums (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). This widespread adoption highlights the enduring conceptual value of these frameworks and their relevance to ongoing discussions of cultural and educational equity. In my study, I aim to build on the pervasive influence of culturally relevant pedagogy in education practices to demonstrate how the concept of mattering is integral to Ladson-Billings' framework.

I deployed these theories to explore how intentionally foregrounding mattering within this pedagogical approach strengthens student-teacher relationships and serves as a critical strategy in advancing educational equity for Black boys and other marginalized groups. I examined how CRP constructs are, or are not, implemented by teachers to affirm, or hinder, Black boys' sense of mattering. Specifically, I explored how each of Ladson-Billings' three propositions, academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, related directly to fostering mattering through teacher-student relationships and instructional approaches. By cross-pollinating the

strengths of CRP with those of mattering, I aim to create a more robust approach to supporting and understanding the positive educational experiences of Black boys. I utilized this theoretical framework as an analytic starting point, it provided a foundational lens through which I saw the data, decided how to code it, and developed the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). The analysis explores student perceptions of teacher's beliefs, intentions, specific practices, classroom interactions, and pedagogical choices that teachers use to communicate students' mattering.

The Current Study

In this study, I draw on the voices of five boys from the Black Boy Mattering Project, to explore how the cultural gap between Black Boys and their teachers, and their use of CRP, influences their sense of mattering. The Black Boy Mattering Project (BBMP) is a research project that partnered with a local high school and employed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and community-building creative activities to investigate Black boys' experiences and perceptions around mattering. Through the voices of Black high school boys, I aim to demonstrate how culturally relevant teaching practices contribute to building positive and supportive teacher-student relationships, while assimilationist approaches, which aim to assimilate children into the dominant culture by ignoring cultural differences, negatively affect these relationships. To frame this study, I connect Ladson-Billing's culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) with Carey's mattering framework, which was informed by constructs from foundational social psychology mattering theories (Carey, 2019; Elliot et al., 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This research adds to the literature by incorporating the perspectives of Black high school students, whose voices are often excluded from research on issues that directly impact them. The current study helps

address a gap in knowledge by exploring whether Black boys perceive that the disconnect between their racial and cultural background and that of their teachers impacts their sense of mattering, and further, how elements of culturally relevant teaching practices mitigate this gap.

Chapter 4

METHODOLOGY

This research study builds on the work of The Black Boy Mattering Project (BBMP) established by Dr. Roderick Carey in 2019. Researchers made the BBMP collaborative by establishing a connection between a university and a local high school. They drew on Carey's (2019, 2020) and Elliott et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of mattering, to explore how Black boys characterize their perception of mattering within their school environment and society. To collect data, researchers utilized semi-structured interviews, focus groups, photos, and field trips to a local art museum featuring an African American art exhibit. Participants were also encouraged to create artistic representations depicting how Black communities and people matter in society. For the present study, the analysis focuses solely on the data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2019 and early March 2020, before Covid-19 related pauses in the program and data collection. This study employed a secondary data analysis of a subset of participants from the Black Boy Mattering Project (BBMP) to examine the cultural gap, their teacher-student relationship, their perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, and how these factors impact their sense of mattering in school. Specifically, I focus on the voices of five Black boys to explore these constructs, using the theoretical framework to frame and interpret their narratives.

Research Context

The research team partnered with County High School (pseudonym), a Title I institution in the mid-Atlantic region with a diverse student body (38% African American, 32% White, 22% Latine, 4% Asian American, 3% multiracial, and 1% other) of 1,059 total students (51% female), see Table 2. County was once a predominately white institution, but it experienced significant demographic shifts due to the establishment of a nearby charter school, which attracted many middle and upper-middle class white families (Carey et al., 2022a). Following this, bussing mandates led to an increase in Black and Latine students, from a nearby urban area, enrolling in County (Carey et al., 2022a). Though County is in a suburban environment, due to the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of County's student body, it aligns with Milner's (2012) definition of an "urban characteristic" school (Carey et al., 2025). County also contends with similar challenges and opportunities of urban schools (Carey et al., 2022a). The school's increasingly racially and ethnically diverse population made it an ideal setting for the BBMP to support educators in addressing the needs of these students. In the most recent academic year, 74% of County High students graduated within four years, with 38% being considered college or career ready. The state measures college and career readiness by assessing the percentage of 12th grade students who have completed their academic coursework, they also factor in proficiency on standardized measures including AP tests, SAT, dual enrollment, multi-literacy, and more if applicable. County High School trails behind state averages of college readiness, graduation rate, ELA proficiency, and math proficiency (See Table 1). Additionally, County exceeds state-wide proportions of students receiving in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

Table 1 Academics of County High School and State

Academic Outcomes of County H.S. and State 2019-20 SY

Student Results	County H.S.	State
Enrollment	1,059	146,684
College or career ready	38%	59%
Four-year graduation rate	74%	88%
Received suspension	37%	14%
Math proficiency	26%	42%
ELA proficiency	39%	53%

Table 2 Demographic Summary of County High School

Demographics of County H.S. Students and Educators 2019-20 SY

Variables		Students	Educators
Count		1,059	64
Race			
	Black	38 %	13%
	White	33%	81%
	Asian	4%	0%
	Two or more races	3%	2%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4%	0%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%
Ethnicity			
	Hispanic/Latine	22%	5%
Gender			
	Female	51%	42%
	Male	49%	58%

Procedures

Before data collection began in Fall 2019, Dr. Carey obtained an IRB approval, and met with district officials, the principal, and the assistant principal to obtain approval for the study. The research team collaborated with school administrators to appoint a teacher leader, to assist with recruitment and logistics. The assistant principal recommended a highly regarded teacher, a middle-aged white woman who had taught at County High School for over a decade. Known for her strong relationships with students and her designation as "Teacher of the Year" in 2019, she was instrumental in building connections between the research team, the school, and the participants. Participants in the BBMP were students who identified as either a boy or young man and as Black or African American, as well being currently attending County. The teacher leader helped recruit students by distributing flyers and seeking

out individuals who met the criteria. Approximately 75% of participants were recruited through this method, while the remaining 25% joined through snowball sampling, when current participants introduced their friends to the project. All participants provided signed assent forms, along with parental consent, before participating in the interviews.

Participants

The subset of participants for this study consists of five boys, out of seventeen total, who were part of the original BBMP cohort during the 2019–2020 school year. All participants self-identified as Black or African American and were enrolled in County high school. These five participants were purposively selected from the broader sample to represent a range of experiences in their relationships with teachers and the perceived impact of culturally relevant teaching practices. The participants are referred to by a pseudonym of their choosing, this was done by researchers to give the participants more agency in the research process (Carey et al., 2022a). Their chosen pseudonyms range from honoring family members, celebrities, and variations of their nicknames (Carey et al., 2022a). Researchers collected demographic information, including age, grade level, self-reported academic interests, and personal qualities during the original study and will be referenced to contextualize the analysis, see Table 3 and 4. Their self-reported interests and personal qualities provide a view into their self-concepts and self-perceptions (Carey et al., 2022a)

Table 3 Participants' Personal Characteristics

Participants	**Age**	**Race**	**Ethnicity**	**Self-Described Personal Qualities**
Charles	18	Black	African American	Laidback and Funny
De'Andre	17	Black	African American	Funny and Calm
Dee	18	Black	African American	Calm, Smart, Outgoing, Kind, Fun, and Caring
Sa(man)tha	17	Black	African American	Compassionate and Generous
Steven	15	Black (Biracial)	African American and White	Smart, Shy, Funny, Caring, and Calm

Table 4 Participant's Academics

Participants	Year	GPA	Favorite Teacher	Extracurriculars
Charles	Senior	N/A	Math Teacher	Basketball and Sports club
De'Andre	Junior	2.8	African American Studies and Economics Teacher	Basketball
Dee	Senior	2.4	African American Studies and Math Teacher	Football, Basketball, and Baseball
Sa(man)tha	Junior	2.4	English Teacher	Track, Academy of Creative Expression, and Wise Guys Program
Steven	Sophomore	3.7	English Teacher	None

Data Sources

The primary data for this study is drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the BBMP study. Each participant engaged in two rounds of interviews, during which they discussed their relationships with teachers, classroom experiences, and perceptions of their sense of mattering within the school environment. The original purpose of the interview was to explore how the students characterized their perceptions of their mattering to the school actors, community, their family, and society. Each interview was conducted with the same researcher for consistency and to allow the researcher to build rapport. The interviews took place in the school, during a designated free period, and typically lasted about 60 minutes. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of

participants' unique perspectives, experiences, and phenomena that they brought up. For this secondary analysis, I will focus on the portions of the interviews that pertain to teacher-student relationships, racial dynamics, and mattering from both interviews of the five participants.

Research Questions

1. What role does culturally relevant pedagogy, as evidenced in students' interpretations, play in Black boys' perception of their mattering?
2. What role does Black boys' perception of their relationship with their teachers play in fostering their sense of mattering?
3. How does the culture gap between Black boys and their educators impact their relationship and sense of mattering?

Data Analysis

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis integrates Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2022) concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), Carey's (2019, 2020) mattering framework, and social-psychological conceptualizations of mattering (Elliot et al., 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). CRP emphasizes the importance of teachers recognizing and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds, values, and experiences into their teaching. Carey's mattering framework explores how Black boys and young men perceive their mattering within their school environment. By combining these two frameworks, I investigated how evidence of culturally relevant teaching practices influences Black boys' sense of mattering and whether such practices help mitigate the cultural gap between students and teachers.

I conducted the first cycle of data analysis in Dedoose 9.2.12, which is an online application for managing and analyzing qualitative data. I used a deductive coding process for the first cycle of coding. A deductive coding approach involves using a set of predetermined codes that are based on theoretical concepts or themes found in existing research or literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I developed an a priori (theoretically based) codebook based on the framework of mattering outlined in Carey's (2019) work, the mattering definitions provided by Elliott et al. (2004), and Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy framework. See appendix A below for the coding manual I used for the first cycle of coding. The second cycle of coding involved memoing the first cycle of coding and thematically analyzing the codes, using an episode profile template adapted from Saldaña's (2021) qualitative coding manual. The episode profile analysis process involved isolating seven to ten episodes (i.e.- self-standing interview excerpts) per participant, listing the priori codes applied, memoing the episode as well as the codes, and writing an overarching coding memo based on the participant. Saldaña (2021) defines memoing as, "The researcher's written reflections on the study's codes/themes and complex meanings of patterns in the qualitative data" (p. 80). Since this data is based on semi-structured interviews, the episodes typically included one to two interview questions and the participants' responses, until they moved on to a different subject, thus, I was able to keep the data contextualized by using this method. I utilized this space to write analytical and reflective notes to document my insights, and decisions throughout the coding and analysis process. Memoing helped me keep track of emerging patterns, coding decisions, theoretical connections, and reflexive insights. They serve as a bridge between raw data and final themes and were particularly helpful for interpreting the

latent meanings and deeper motivations in the participants' narratives because it allowed me to go beyond the surface level of their words and explore the ideas, meanings, concepts, and assumptions in the data. I used the theoretical framework to guide this deeper level of analysis.

This process allowed me to deeply engage with the participants' statements and glean richer analysis, that I eventually developed into the themes. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify significant patterns or themes, while capturing the rich details within the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Terry et al., 2017). This was used to distill coded episodes, across participants, triangulate similar analytic memos and patterns of codes into themes that categorize and provide insights (Terry et al., 2017) into how the participants' perceptions of their teacher relationships, the culture gap, and articulations of culturally relevant pedagogy shaped their mattering in the classroom. This process involved writing overarching memos for the participants' episode profile to identify recurring themes related to teacher-student relationships, cultural relevancy, and the boys' perceived mattering within their school environment. After I had completed both cycles of coding on the entire dataset, I began constructing themes by reviewing my memos and grouping quotes and my analyses by similar patterns that I recognized that were salient to my research questions (Terry et al., 2017). After a few cycles of reviewing, distilling, revising, and re-naming themes I transitioned to developing and writing the report (Terry et al., 2017).

The initial codes that have already been applied to the data that were used in this analysis include comprehensive mattering, marginal mattering, partial mattering, perceived mattering, perspective on teachers, perspective on administrators or deans, perspective on discipline, and school climate or culture. I took coding tests to establish

reliability. I obtained a Krippendorff's alpha score of .85 which indicates strong agreement among coders (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The other coders were previous researchers who had analyzed the data using the initial codes, I was the only coder for the following new codes that are based on my theoretical and conceptual framework. I incorporated the following new codes with relevant sub-codes based on the research questions: positive relationships with teachers, negative relationships with teachers, culturally relevant practices, and assimilationist practices. The code for culturally relevant practices includes sub-codes to pull out teacher behaviors and practices that align with this framework. These sub-codes include demanding academic success, taking personal responsibility, cultural competence, respect for students, seeing students as individual holistic beings, and equitable relationships with all students. On the other hand, assimilationist practices undermine Black students by aiming to uphold the status quo and maintain marginalization. The subcodes used to define assimilationist practices were discriminatory behavior toward students, stereotyping, anti-black racism, and disproportionate disciplinary practices. These codes build on previously deployed codes by categorizing students' relationships with teachers and deepening the analysis of how specific teacher behaviors lead to student perceptions. This allowed me to pull out relevant episodes and later examine how themes of mattering related to specific school practices and student perception of such. This coding scheme and process led to nuanced insights of this data and important implications for practice and policy, which I discuss in detail later.

By drawing on the theoretical framework, as the building blocks of the analysis, my aim was to understand how engaging or not engaging in culturally relevant practices contributes to or detracts from Black boys' sense of mattering in

school. I paid specific attention to identifying the conditions under which CRP fostered strong, positive relationships between students and teachers, and how this, in turn, affects students' perception of mattering.

Trustworthiness

Throughout this study, I adhered to rigor principles from the qualitative tradition, to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I include thick and rich descriptions of the participants' quotations in my findings to sufficiently contextualize their statements (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I triangulated multiple theories to make sense of the students' articulations, through a wide lens (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I incorporate their interpretations of social relationships with their educators and other school personnel, as well as my viewpoints and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I reflected on my positionality before, during, and after conducting coding, analysis, and writing (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). I was cognizant of how my positionality influenced my interpretations of their words and my analysis. I engaged in reflection to avoid superimposing my perspective on the participants, although I recognize that subjectivity and bias is inevitable (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To counteract misinterpretations, I drew on feedback from my advisor and the original researchers on the project who shared the same racial and gender identity as the participants. I also emphasize their voice through rich and contextualized quotes, as well as the theme names, to keep them salient to the analysis. This reflects authenticity because I remain critical of my own biases, values, and experiences and how they affect my subjective interpretation throughout this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I engaged in honest reflection on those aspects. I also solicited a peer, who identifies as a Black, female,

graduate student, to review my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This peer offered critical feedback, which I incorporated into my findings. This study was very impactful for me and has spurred me to explore deeper questions of mattering among adolescents, critical consciousness among students of color, and more research questions in the future (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Positionality

To situate myself in this study, I reflect on my personal and professional background, social identities, and the ways these aspects shape my research on racial equity in the education system. Understanding and reflecting on my positionality is crucial to ensuring ethical research practices and acknowledging the influence of power dynamics on the production knowledge (Milner, 2007). Milner emphasizes that researchers must critically engage with their own biases, experiences, and assumptions to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes or reinforcing existing power imbalances within the research process. By engaging in continuous self-reflective practices throughout this process, I strive to conduct research that contributes meaningfully to racial equity in the education system by respecting and valuing the voices and perspectives of those most affected by educational inequities and authentically representing the lived experiences of marginalized communities rather than superimposing my biases, experiences, or assumptions.

As a first-generation American of Indian descent, my experiences with racial discrimination and oppressive systems shape my approach to understanding the lived experiences of my participants. I recognize that my understandings of racial marginalization and discrimination are shaped by my own unique lived experiences. By critically examining my assumptions by engaging in reflective practices and

discussions, I reduce the risk of misinterpreting the participants' voices and imposing my perspective on theirs. This contributes to an authentic and accurate representation of participants' experiences.

As a researcher affiliated with the University of Delaware, I recognize, acknowledge, and denounce the historical and ongoing impacts of the University's actions that have contributed to oppression and systemic biases against marginalized communities. This includes, but is not limited to, the historical and present marginalization of diverse perspectives in knowledge production, curriculum, and policy, appropriating the land of Indigenous peoples, the underrepresentation of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups in faculty, leadership, and the student body (hooks, 1994; University of Delaware Anti-Racism Initiative, 2021). My position within this institution requires me to acknowledge and consider these histories as I conduct research aimed at amplifying the voices of youth of color and advocating for this group.

As a cisgender woman researching the experiences of boys, I recognize that my gender identity shapes my perspective and interactions within this research. Being a woman may create differences in how I interpret and relate to the experiences of boys. I acknowledge that, while my position allows me to bring a gendered lens to issues of equity, my own experiences may differ significantly from those of the boys in my study. To address this, I am committed to engaging deeply with their perspectives and allowing their authentic experiences to guide my interpretations. Peer feedback will allow me to verify my interpretations of the boys' experiences by inviting feedback from a male perspective, this will help ensure that my analysis truthfully reflects their viewpoints and experiences.

As an able-bodied, stably housed, American citizen, with higher education, I recognize the privilege and power I hold in relation to my participants. My academic background, foundational knowledge, and research training in Human Development and Family Sciences, provides me with a privileged standpoint that diverges from the nuanced experiences of the youth in my study, but it allows me to theorize on ways to enhance their school experiences and developmental outcomes. Power in the instance of analyzing secondary data can manifest through the authority researchers hold in shaping how participants' voices are interpreted and represented. I strove to mitigate the power imbalance between the participants and myself, as a researcher, by using strengths-based perspectives, remaining true to their words, emphasizing their agency, and acknowledging the inherent strengths that the participants have in their responses.

Throughout this research, I held a reflexive stance by continuously questioning how my positionality affects my interactions with participants' data and the conclusions that I draw from such. I am committed to ethical research practices that prioritize the agency and voices of marginalized groups, ensuring that their narratives are represented accurately and respectfully. During this project, I engaged in regular reflection and sought feedback from the community, my mentors, and colleagues to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings. I approached this data with a theoretical framework because I was curious about the underlying story, I could uncover by analyzing the data this way. I believe that the themes I developed are a result of my coding, analytic skills, experiences, and conceptual standpoints thus, they are the outcome of my interpretive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

By critically engaging with my positionality, I aim to conduct research that is not only academically rigorous but also ethically sound and socially just. Recognizing

the power dynamics inherent in the research process is essential to fostering an inclusive research space.

Chapter 5

FINDINGS

In this section I present the findings, based on the data from these interviews. I highlight five interconnected themes, and relevant sub-themes, that I developed from analyzing the data through the lens of the theoretical framework and are central to understanding the research questions. When discussing their experiences of mattering in school and relationships with their educators, each participant articulated unique insights, I used the theoretical framework to interpret their responses and group them by similarities, latent meaning, and deeper motivations. These themes help illustrate how the participants construct meaning of their experiences in school, with a particular focus on the ways that the quality of their relationships with educators and administrators influenced their sense of mattering. I also paid close attention to what educator practices led to their judgement of relationship quality, as well as their articulation of the role that racialized dynamics play. Through representative quotes, I demonstrate the ways the Black boys articulate the cultural competence and relevance of their educators', or lack thereof, that manifests in their education experiences through their overt and covert interactions with educators, administrators, and staff. Additionally, the racialized encounters that students' voice are explored through the lens of the culture gap, between students and their teachers, and contextualized as the antithesis to the key principles of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Theme 1: "They Invest in Our Success"

The first theme that I generated was *They Invest in Our Success*. The participants articulated feelings of deeper mattering when teachers went beyond standard teaching practices to provide dedicated effort to support students' unique needs, and a commitment to fostering students' full potential, academically and personally. This theme is illustrated by the sub-themes of *individualized efforts* and *high expectations*. Participants recounted teachers who made *individualized efforts* to ensure that they deeply understood and grasped the class material, by meeting them at their current level of knowledge on a subject, exemplified this approach. Participants also described this investment as evidenced in the actions of teachers who held them to *high expectations,* by checking in with them to ensure they are completing work and earning high grades, demonstrating a belief in their capability.

This level of teacher investment fostered a deeper sense of mattering to students because it signaled to them that their success matters, on a personal level, to their teachers. These teachers embodied the CRP concept of "warm demanders," showing care and a belief in students' potential while holding them to high academic expectations. This approach was critical in fostering mattering, as students interpreted their teacher's belief in them as a sign that they are valued. The through line in the descriptions of teachers that promoted a deeper sense of mattering are providing individualized help, maintaining high expectations, being actively invested in students' learning journeys, and demonstrating their belief in their academic abilities.

Individualized Efforts

In this sub-theme, individualized efforts refer to teachers providing support that is tailored to meet students at their current level of understanding. This approach contrasts with a collective teaching method, where teachers uniformly deliver lessons to the class, and do not instruct further. By supporting students through engaging with them one-on-one and meeting them at their level of understanding, teachers demonstrate an intentional investment in their success. CRP posits that scaffolding learning through building bridges between what students know and new knowledge is an important step in facilitating learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Doing so also signals to students that their teachers value their understanding, fostering positive forms of mattering. When asked about a time he felt that he mattered, Charles, a senior at County who describes himself as laidback and funny, said:

> My teachers like when I asked them for help on something, you know they actually helped me out and made me understand it better. And it made me feel good, like there are good people out there that help, that truly help out people, help them understand and come to sense about things.

Charles' reflection speaks to a deeper sense of mattering because the teacher's investment in his academic success communicates to Charles that his academic growth is important to the teacher. For Charles the feeling that he can depend on this teacher to go beyond his base-level teaching obligations to help him understand the material on a deeper level resulted in a positive emotional response. Charles infers his mattering to this teacher through knowing that his outcomes are important to someone other than himself. Expanding on this, Charles credited his tenth-grade math teacher for not only helping him pass a challenging class but also fostering a sense of accomplishment:

> This was like my tenth-grade year in math. My math teacher he always helped out. Like, I was always stuck on like a problem or on a test. I'd like raise my hand, ask him to come over here, and he'd help me right out. He helped me to pass tenth grade, so it's like, I'm thankful for that. For helping me out on a hard thing for me.

When asked how this made him feel, Charles reflected:

> It made me feel good that I had a teacher that came through and helped me out on certain things in life, especially for tenth grade, because if, you know, if he didn't help me out, then I would probably be a junior right now and I wouldn't be on the road to being a graduate in high school.

This demonstrates how teachers' active investment in students' success fosters not only academic achievement but also a sense of being valued by the teacher. This is a key element of mattering in the classroom, bolstering students' feelings of importance through educators valuing their academic success as a whole and helping them meet larger goals. Charles' words convey that the teacher's investment in him had long-term implications, beyond the scope of that classroom, for his educational trajectory. The teacher holding his success as an important priority, stopped Charles from falling through the cracks academically.

High Expectations

Active investment in students' academic success can also be better understood by recognizing high expectations. High expectations refer to the belief that students are capable of achieving at a high academic level, and this belief is communicated by holding students to a high standard, providing accountability, and consistent support. This sentiment was illustrated in different ways across participants. Dee, a senior boy who sees himself as calm, smart, and outgoing, articulated how a teacher who set high expectations and held students accountable contributed to his sense of mattering. Mrs. Kent's consistent check-ins and guidance reflect the invested approach of a warm

demander. Her actions demonstrated a genuine commitment to Dee's academic success, making him feel supported and valued. When asked who he can be his full self with Dee says: "Mrs. Kent, she really helps us… she really looks out. Like, I used to go see her every Monday, just to make sure my grades was right." Mrs. Kent's actions of looking out for students, via checking in, and remaining updated on their grades helped Dee feel like he could be his full self with her. Her support and consistent accountability with his grades, cultivated an intrinsic motivation for achievement in Dee. These high expectations were not exclusive to educators in school, when asked how he knows someone values him Dee says:

> They get on me. If they didn't get on me, I would know that they didn't care. I think – 'cause I kind of figured that out from sports, like, if your coach doesn't really get on you like that, he don't really care that much. So, I know if my mom's still yelling at me or my dad's still yelling at me and getting on me about little things, I know they care, and want me to be successful, and want to see me graduate, and all that.

This insight connects perceived investment and encouragement with mattering. For Dee, when his coach and parents actively pushed him to succeed, he interpreted that they believe in his potential and value him and his future, affirming his sense of mattering to them. The foundation of mattering theory was built on Rosenberg's (1963) investigation of how parents demonstrate interest in their child by viewing them as important. High interest cultivates a child's self-worth and self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1963), which are important outcomes for students.

When talking about his favorite teachers Dee says:

> Like [they] always help me. Say I need help with homework, they help me with it. Or, if I'm missing something they'll tell me. They'll be like 'Make sure you get this done so I can get you a grade for it' and all that.

Dee's articulation underscores how his favorite teachers go beyond teaching well and view his academic progress as important to them. They take personal responsibility, through reminders and holding him accountable, to ensure that he stays on track. This demonstrates that they believe him capable of academic success and his success matters to them.

Dee's and Charles' positive experiences with teachers at County illustrate how the CRP concept of academic success aligns with fostering positive forms of mattering, specifically feeling important and valued. This proactive and relational approach communicates to students that they and their success are valued and important to the teacher, creating a foundation for mattering in school. Their articulations also demonstrate how teachers who prioritize believing in students' potential, guiding them, and following through foster a sense of mattering. By helping students navigate challenges, they validate their efforts and signal that their success matters to them. Their narratives also highlight the critical role of individual effort in affirming Black boys' mattering within the educational environment. These findings suggest that embedding the principles of CRP in teacher-student relationships can significantly impact how students perceive their mattering and role within the school.

Theme 2: "They Look Out for Us"

Participants often felt that they mattered most to their Black teachers and administrators due to them taking responsibility for their success, an important element of CRP. Participants' educators took personal responsibility for their success academically, socially, and behaviorally by taking initiative to guide students, engage with them personally, and help them overcome barriers. The participants articulated this support in two distinct ways, restorative discipline practices (i.e.- building

relationships to address conflict in contrast to taking punitive measures) and a sense of shared understanding and affinity between themselves and other Black educators, administrators, and staff.

Restorative Discipline Approaches

Participants described the discipline approaches their teachers took as racially and culturally entrenched. They compared the approaches of white educators and Black educators and emphasized the differences in understanding, cultural competence, and protection between these groups of educators. Dee described the approaches of Black administrators as, he noted, “I think our administration, our Black administration, tries to implement that good into them [Black students], tell them what's right from wrong, like, it's not okay to keep fighting all the time.” When asked how the white administrators treat Black boys, Dee states, “[They] just suspend 'em, give 'em consequences. Every time, it's just, every time, like say you do something little, you don't throw away your apple juice carton, you'll get a writeup from a white administrator. It's how it works.”

This stark contrast highlights how Black administrators’ approach Black students’ behavior and interpersonal conflict, by creating opportunities for conversation and guiding them towards better decision-making. Dee’s articulations of these practices demonstrate that Black boys’ experiences in school, development, and outcomes, matter to their Black administration. The punitive measures from white administrators, and the lack of rehabilitating practices, exacerbates the marginal mattering that Black boys perceive in the school environment. Dee emphasizes that Black administrators take a more understanding and restorative approach to discipline, while white administrators take punitive measures.

The culture gap between white teachers and students of color is rooted in the different experiences, norms, and values of each group (Carey et al., 2018). Dee's narrative of Black administrators engaging in proactive intervention rather than punishment supports that they are more attuned to the cultural and lived experiences of Black students and understand that behavioral issues stem from systemic inequities, trauma, or socialization rather than purposeful defiance or disrespect. This distinction reflects a broader cultural gap in how authority figures view the realities that Black students experience and how they contextualize their actions.

Shared Understanding and Affinity

A common thread through descriptions of their relationships with Black teachers, staff, and administration was the recognition, on students' and adults' parts, that they experienced similar realities thus, fostering shared understanding and a natural affinity. This affinity and understanding manifested through recognizing anti-Black racism and forming personal connections. De'Andre, a junior at County who describes himself as funny and plays basketball, recounted an example of systemic racism undermining Black educators:

> A couple of teachers are racist, and I see it for myself. I don't want to call the principal racist, but I think he dislikes Black people, too. I was told there was a Black teacher working here last year... she was cool, brought you food, let you chill in her class, and [the principal] didn't like her, so he made her leave.

De'Andre's sentiment underscores how the presence of a culturally competent Black educator who met Black students' social and emotional needs, was undermined by racism within the school administration and pressured out of the school. This highlights a critical issue, Black teachers, who only make up 13% of all teachers at

County, and provide important support for Black students, are also marginalized in the school. De'Andre experienced second-hand marginalization through this event, as he interpreted it as evidence that the principal dislikes Black people. This action cultivated the marginal mattering of Black students in the broader school environment because it signaled that their appreciation for this teacher was insignificant to the principal.

Dee explains that support primarily comes from Black faculty and staff:

> The only people that really help me is, we have a lot of Black hall monitors. They only have one Black dean – that's my dad – but we have a lot of Black hall monitors. They'll sit down and talk to us, and , the basketball coach, and Davis, he's another basketball coach. But other than that, it's really no help

Dee's experience highlights that Black staff, even in non-teaching roles, offer the most support to him. Listing the Black hall monitors, dean, and coach as his primary sources of support over the teachers, who are formally responsible for the students, speaks to the role of the culture gap in Black boys' school experience. The culture gap literature posits that the shared life experiences between Black staff and students shaped by their racial realities fosters understanding between them. This understanding can support the foundation of building supportive relationships. Dee's perception that "other than that, it's really no help" implies that he feels invisible and unsupported by most of the faculty, reinforcing his marginal mattering.

Dee and De'Andre's statements highlight the crucial role of culture gap between Black students and white educators especially in discipline practices and supporting students. Black students perceive Black faculty and staff as more open to understanding and engaging personally with them. Black faculty take restorative discipline approaches, such as talking to students and trying to understand their

situations, rather than defaulting to punishment. This relational investment fosters trust and a sense of mattering, showing students that teachers' actions based on students' behavior can foster growth rather than exclusion. White faculty, by contrast, are described as adversarial, reinforcing the deficit narrative that Black boys are inherently problematic, which can cultivate marginal mattering.

Theme 3: "They Humanize Us"

Black boys' sense of mattering often hinged on whether participants perceived teachers to utilize humanizing elements in their pedagogy. CRP was foregrounded with the Bartolome's (1994) articulation of a "humanizing pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice" (p. 173). CRP furthers this notion by emphasizing the role of relational and personal engagement with students in humanizing them. Carey's (2019) comprehensive mattering posits that the multiple avenues of inherent worth and talent within Black boys must be recognized by educators for them to infer robust mattering. To do so, educators must recognize and value their students as complete human beings, with unique backgrounds, talents, and interests, rather than solely, one-dimensional academic learners.

A humanizing approach by teachers, through the participants' experiences, is demonstrated by relational and personal engagement, as well as responsiveness to student's academic and personal needs. Participants frequently contrasted humanizing teachers with those who seemed indifferent. Those who seemed indifferent demonstrated this by beginning and ending their engagement with their students by instructing in their subject areas and failing to acknowledge and adapt to the holistic aspects of their students' identities. The overarching theme of participants'

experiences with these educators was that they saw them as whole individuals, with other valuable and complex identities, experiences, and personal lives, rather than just students. Thus, these teachers were able to foster stronger relationships and mattering through recognizing their students' full humanity. This approach can be better understood through the sub-themes of engaging in non-academic conversations, relating to students' lives, and initiating personal connections.

Engaging in Non-Academic Conversations

One of the key characterizations of humanizing interactions was the simple act of engaging the students in conversations, typically demonstrating interest in their life and personality outside of academics. This engagement in informal dialogue signals to students that their teacher recognizes that they are a multidimensional individual beyond being a student in the classroom. When asked how teachers at County support Black students, Dee described the impact of humanizing interactions:

> That could actually help, that can make or break somebody's day right there, just, like, simple conversation with them. That makes, like, if it was me, that would make me feel like, you know, it's important for me to be here and do my stuff and get it done, so I can graduate.

Dee highlights how acts such as a simple conversation, fosters positive mattering through signaling that it is important for him to be in school. He also connects this act to motivation for completing his work and graduation, further reinforcing the impact of humanizing interactions. Dee's positive relationships with certain teachers were marked by active effort, which he related to experiencing a sense of mattering. This underscores how personal interactions with teachers and staff affirm students' mattering in the school environment.

Similarly, Charles describes how the deans at County interact with Black boys personally, reinforcing that they matter at school. When asked how Black boys matter at County, Charles described these relationships, characterized by humanizing interactions:

> Well, sometimes, you know, teachers, they're active with us. Like we got certain things with teachers. Like most of us are like cool with like the deans and stuff, 'cause, you know, we talk to them about our problems and stuff and then they help out here and there. It's not like they can help out every time but, you know, they do what they can with us. So it's like they care.

Charles experiences mattering through the deans being actively involved with him and taking a personal interest in getting to know him as a holistic person, beyond just a student. He also extends his interpretation to apply to the other Black boys and young men at county. Based on his reflections, the deans humanizing interactions are framed by discussing topics outside of academics, with students, like their personal problems and offering advice. This readiness to offer support and guidance signals to students that their deans care about them and recognize their full humanity. To Charles, this was what came to mind when describing how he knows that Black boys matter in school, further emphasizing the importance of these types of interactions and relationships.

Relating to Students' Lives

Another important through line in the humanizing interactions that the participants described, was a recognition of intentional efforts to relate to students and signaling interest in what matters to them. In particular, participants described white teachers' acknowledging their interests and incorporating humor into the classroom in efforts to be relatable to their students.

When discussing one of his favorite teachers, Steven, a sophomore at County who wants to be an English teacher, explains: “Oh, like I said, he connects with the students. He's funny. He tells jokes with them.” Steven highlights an important aspect of CRP, teachers who engage students on a personal level by incorporating humor and informal interactions foster deeper connections. His statement suggests that this teacher reframes the authoritative role of educators by, using humor as a bridge to rapport. This teacher’s ability to build relationships through humor and shared interests suggests an approach aligned with the “warm demander” framework, in which teachers maintain high expectations while also demonstrating care and building connection.

When asked how this teacher connects with students, Steven expands: “He constantly knows what's going on with them, and he draws memes on the board sometimes.” This statement highlights another key component of effective engagement and CRP, consistently staying updated with students lives and aware of their experiences. By staying attuned to students’ lives and integrating memes into the classroom, the teacher demonstrates an effort to connect with students on their level. This approach makes learning feel more relevant and accessible while also affirming students’ identities and interests. Steven’s emphasis on this teacher’s consistent efforts to check in further reinforces how relational engagement must be an ongoing practice, not a sporadic effort. Teachers who demonstrate genuine curiosity and investment in their students’ well-being and life outside of the classroom signal to the students that they are noticed, valued, and worth remembering. Mattering theory emphasizes that being noticed and acknowledged regularly, fosters an inferred sense of importance to a

person, which is key to encourage positive mattering in environments where students often feel overlooked and experience marginal mattering.

Steven also praises Mrs. Kent (Pseudonym) stating: “she also connects with us intellectually, I think, and she helps us out with stuff for colleges. She's really with us there. She gives us good knowledge that we will need eventually for in our coming up lives.” This statement points to her taking a humanizing approach because she values students’ lives beyond their time at County. Mrs. Kent takes responsibility for helping students plan for college and their future, demonstrating an investment in their long-term success. By offering guidance on college and career readiness, she validates students' aspirations and affirms that she sees them as capable, another important component of CRP. This type of relationship affirms students' sense of importance by making them feel like their futures matter to another person.

Initiating Personal Connections

One key recognition of fostering these connections, is whose responsibility it is to initiate them. Steven often felt responsibility for doing so but wished that his teachers would take more responsibility for this. Steven reflects on his own personality and communication preferences, when asked what he wishes his teachers knew, stating:

> I would want them to know that I'm really not a social person, and I want them to know that if they were to talk to me, I would talk to them, but I'm not really gonna go up to somebody and talk to them that I don't know.

This self-awareness reveals an important dynamic that many students, particularly those who are introverted or feel disconnected from school, do not naturally seek out teachers for initiating a personal connection. When asked if teachers expect students to

initiate communication, Steven responds: “I feel like they do, but I don’t think that’s how it should be. I feel like the teachers should go to the students and talk to them personally.” Steven’s perspective suggests that the burden of engagement should not fall solely on students, especially those who already feel marginalized. When teachers assume that students will seek them out, they overlook the reality that many students, especially those who feel overlooked, will not voluntarily engage.

Teachers’ relating to students on a human level can encourage positive relationship building. This helps ensure that students who may otherwise slip through the cracks are given opportunities to connect, seek help, and feel valued by their school community. By approaching students first, teachers demonstrate that they care, reducing any cultural or social barriers that may prevent students from reaching out. Steven’s words highlight a critical flaw in many teacher-student dynamics, that they expect that students should bridge the gap rather than teachers taking the initiative. His ideal vision of relationship building involves teachers actively reaching out to students, ensuring that all students, regardless of personality or background, feel included in meaningful relationships.

Participants emphasized the importance of educators who saw them as whole individuals, with interests and personal lives, rather than just objective learners. Holistic support included addressing students’ needs, offering guidance, and checking in beyond the academic context. These teacher-student interactions often were mentioned in students’ articulations of how they know they matter at school. These interactions demonstrate the critical role of humanizing pedagogy and personal investment in fostering mattering for Black boys. When Black boys perceive that

teachers care about their holistic development, they feel valued as complete and complex humans, a crucial element of fostering comprehensive mattering.

Theme 4: "They Don't Care About Us"

By exploring the boys' articulations of negative experiences with teachers through the lens of CRP, I analyze how the absence of CRP is at the core of their experience. One of CRP's core tenets is creating an environment where students feel valued, seen, and supported, which is an element that Steven, Sa(man)tha, and Charles find lacking in his school. They describe feeling neglected or targeted by teachers, with a lack of care and personal responsibility being central to their complaints. Their observations that teachers fail to be relationally engaged, support students, and "are out to get them" speaks to a larger structural issue, where teachers do not teach in relational ways that encourage students to reach their full potential in school.

Targeting Black Boys

The lack of care that the boys experienced from their educators was often described by feeling targeted by teachers for their behavior. Charles expressed frustration with being targeted by teachers and a lack of care, stating:

> Sometimes it be feeling like the teachers are out there for you, like they want to get to you or something. But then it's like sometimes the teachers just don't be caring. You know, so, sometimes the teachers gonna help and sometimes [they're] not, so then it's kind of you gotta do it yourself.

This lack of consistent care and help made Charles feel unsupported in class and unsure of when he can depend on his teachers. Charles also describes feeling explicitly targeted by teachers. The experience of feeling target and unable to depend on his teachers for support, resulted in Charles feeling alone in pursuing academic success.

Charles' description of unsupportive teachers at County directly undermines the CRP principle of "academic success", specifically exemplifying a deep commitment to student success and taking personal responsibility to help them reach it. Instead, the teachers that Charles describes dismiss his intelligence and academic ability, which is inherent in cultivating marginal mattering.

Dee elaborates on how discipline is deliberately utilized to push Black boys out of school:

> Just to get'em out of the school, to find something to egg them on or get them to do something so they can get out of the school. They don't want that here.

This statement reveals that there is an intention of racialized exclusion behind the disproportionate punishment of Black students, rather than discipline being a neutral process. Dee suggests that teachers and administrators actively seek out ways to push Black boys into trouble. The phrase "egg them on" implies that teachers and administrators provoke or escalate situations, potentially through unfair treatment, microaggressions, or excessive disciplinary responses. This suggests that some teachers view Black boys as problems to be removed, rather than as students to be supported. Thus, Black boys experience marginal mattering, as a result of these practices that reinforce criminalization of their behaviors. It also reflects a broader systemic failure at County, where Black students are not given the same benefit of the doubt, opportunities for correction, or support that white students receive.

Surface-level Teaching

A lack of care from teachers was also typically described as teachers engaging in surface-level teaching, merely fulfilling their responsibility to instruct the whole class and going no further when students express that they need more academic

support. Sa(man)tha, a junior at County who wants to be an English teacher, contextualized surface-level teaching by describing not being able to depend on their teacher:

> She [Spanish teacher] just thinks everything's a joke. Like, we tried to tell her we don't understand what she's talking about. You know, Spanish like, it's a different language. We don't know that language. So you know, learning that language is going to take time. And she don't take the time to help us out. And she want us to ask other people how to do it and like, we're confused. We don't know what to do. And so when we try to ask – that's why nobody wants to come to her class. When we try to ask, she just don't help out. She don't. That's like the class I'm struggling with.

Sa(man)tha's articulations of their Spanish teacher failing to foster understanding and not meeting students at the level of knowledge they have on a subject, contextualizes their struggles with the class and the teacher. This articulation is also misaligned with the CRP construct of academic success, particularly providing equitable support when needed. This can be done by recognizing students' strengths and building new knowledge on that foundation, which the teacher does not do. Instead, she places the responsibility of learning, and resolving confusion, onto the students' themselves. Although, CRP reinforces the value of equity between teachers and students by encouraging students to act as teachers and learn collaboratively, to do this some students must first possess an understanding of what is being taught which was not the case in Sa(man)tha's experience. Supplemental support from the teacher must also be available, for students to successfully learn collaboratively, Ladson-Billings (1995) often found this to be done by teachers' moving to sit in a students' desk and chiming in when necessary. Sa(man)tha's perspective of this teacher highlights the detrimental impact of her teaching style, and his experience in class, on

his overall motivation to attend class. This highlights a direct link between teacher investment and student motivation or disengagement, which is crucial.

The unwillingness to invest in students signals to them that their success and understanding is not important to the teacher, which can negatively impact perceived mattering. CRP emphasizes that teachers must meet students where they are, adapt their teaching to diverse learning needs, and ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed. Instead, this teacher's approach reflects an assumption that students should already understand the content or be able to teach themselves, ignoring the reality that language acquisition requires guidance, repetition, and scaffolded instruction. Thus, by failing to provide extra help when needed, she did not create a supportive and equitable learning environment that fosters all students' reaching their full academic potential.

Steven reflected Sa(man)tha's sentiment of teachers' showing a lack of care towards students by only engaging in surface level interactions. When asked what the worst part about school was, Steven pointed to the difficulty in forming meaningful connections with teachers, stating:

> It's kind of hard connecting with the teachers, I feel…Because some of them are usually not really outgoing with their students. So, they just want to be more of a teacher, and not someone who'd want to connect with their students so the students can feel it's a safe environment for them, too.

Here Steven suggests that a disconnect between teachers and students is a fundamental issue in the school environment. Steven distinguishes between teachers who merely perform the functional role of an educator and those who actively work to build a relational and emotionally supportive classroom environment through making personal connections. His statement suggests that many teachers approach their role

by focusing solely on surface-level instruction without engaging in meaningful interpersonal relationships with their students. Steven also highlights how this disconnection from teachers impacts students' perception of school as a safe environment. Perceiving school as a safe environment is important for fostering social and emotional well-being for students.

These observations reinforce the broader concept that students' negative experiences with teachers are the result of a lack of CRP, particularly the construct of academic success. Their experiences reveal a pattern in which teachers are barriers to students' sense of mattering and academic success rather than supportive figures. Without support and meaningful engagement from teachers, students may feel as though they are merely objective minds in a classroom rather than individuals whose presence, experiences, and success truly matters. This failure to foster connection exacerbates feelings of marginal mattering, reinforcing the need for culturally competent and relevant educators. A critical component of CRP is the belief that all students can succeed and that teachers bear responsibility for cultivating both academic growth and emotional well-being. However, the participants' experiences reflect a school environment where many teachers fail to embody these principles and remain indifferent to the challenges Black boys face. Without intentional efforts to bridge this gap, Black boys remain unsupported and targeted in the institutions that are meant to foster their growth.

Theme 5: "We Want to Reach Our Full Potential"

Black boys in this study described navigating school environments with a heightened awareness of how they are perceived by their teachers and administrators, often feeling the need to advocate for themselves and project an image of competence

in order to counteract negative assumptions. This intention reflects that these boys *want to reach their full potential,* countering commonly imposed deficit narratives about Black boys' school behaviors and intelligence (Allen, 2017). Carey (2019) states that comprehensive mattering seeks to nurture the boy who is entangled by the socially constructed notions of how a Black boy 'should' be. This assertion frames my analysis of how and why the participants seek to reach their full potential.

Their narratives highlight the intersection of agency and mattering, by showing how Black boys take intentional steps to be recognized in a system that often renders them invisible. While students' ability to assert themselves academically and socially demonstrates resilience, their experiences also highlight the added burden placed on Black boys to prove their capabilities and challenge deficit-based assumptions held by educators. Some of the participants also discussed awareness of the treatment of Black boys in school, particularly by white educators, as a reflection of greater societal oppression of Black populations. This socio-political awareness, also known as critical consciousness, is an important skill that students need to critique institutions and foster active citizenship (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students demonstrate a critical awareness, but lower confidence about their ability to create change in systems that maintain inequity. Ladson-Billings posits that facilitating all aspects of critical consciousness, including the ability to disrupt the status quo, is a crucial element of a culturally relevant teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Heightened Awareness

Students described becoming attuned to stereotypes and perceptions of Black boys in schools and engaging in behaviors that reflect this awareness.

Charles describes this by stating:

> If there's a question in class I'll raise my hand and show that I'm giving out an answer or I'm about to like do something that's good in class, giving the teachers my perspective and showing them that I can use my brain to the full extent. Yeah.

Charles' statement shows that he purposely demonstrates effort and engagement in the classroom, to signal his intelligence, which reflects a strategic response to teachers' assumptions about Black boys. He consciously works to align his behavior with teachers' expectations to counteract stereotypes about Black boys. This demonstrates how students actively work to project a positive image and challenge assumptions about Black boys. This effort shows that he wants to voice to be heard, rather than silenced, demonstrating that he wants to signal his significance and mattering.

Sa(man)tha describes their participation in extracurriculars similarly:

> We do programs and stuff, art programs. I participate, and I try to show what I can do in the school. I try to do enough so that everybody know that this is what I do. When I won the award, that wasn't expected from me. I didn't know that was gonna be big or anything. Then everybody looked at me and it was like, "Oh, that's such a good job. You did a great thing." That gives you that push to keep doing stuff, and it gives the school a good look that this is what, us in [County], we can do.

Sa(man)tha's reflection highlights Black boys' agency in actively shaping their school identities and countering assumptions about their capabilities. By participating in art programs Sa(man)tha takes intentional steps to validate and recognize their abilities. This demonstrates a deliberate effort to assert visibility in a space where Black students often feel overlooked or undervalued. The moment of winning an award becomes a pivotal experience, as Sa(man)tha acknowledges the unexpected nature of recognition, suggesting that their achievements were not initially seen as expected by others. This points to the importance of emphasizing the unique strengths of each student, an element of CRP, because it resulted in motivating Sa(man)tha toward achieving.

Reflection of Greater Society

Some participants related their treatment in schools to larger societal patterns of treatment. Dee describes awareness of the racialized pattern of treatment that Black boys face in the school:

> I feel like even the black boys in this school know it is what it is. They're not going to help us. Gotta get it on your own. That's how it's always going to be. It's never going to change. People are always going to be people at the end of the day. They're going to judge. They're going to be spiteful, envious, all that.

Dee's reflection emphasizes his awareness of the systemic inequities Black boys face in school, highlighting how their experiences are shaped by patterns of neglect, racial bias, and a lack of institutional support. His statement suggests a collective understanding among Black boys that they are not prioritized within the educational system, reinforcing a narrative of self-reliance. His perspective reflects an internalization of the culture gap, he expects disengagement from his educators, and in response he has developed a self-reliant approach. Instead of seeing his academic success as a collective responsibility, as CRP posits, he views it as an individual burden. Rather than complete resignation, Dee's statement underscores the adaptive agency of Black boys, who cultivate self-sufficiency and resilience in response to exclusion.

To Dee the treatment of Black boys in school, particularly in reference to disciplinary approaches, reflects the way that Black men are treated by greater society, he articulated this by stating: "It's just the way the world is, I learned that. My mom always told me that… it just, it is what it is. we try to do something about it, but there's only so much we can do." Thus, the experience of the culture gap in school reinforces racial dynamics that Black populations experience in greater society. His recognition

that this treatment is systemic points to a critical understanding of the inequities of Black populations in general. Although, he does not see these injustices as something that can be changed, which reflects a lack of critical motivation. One of the main constructs of CRP is that these teachers encourage critical consciousness, a socio-political awareness, and learn to critique institutions that perpetuate social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). A key part of critical consciousness development is critical motivation, fostering a sense of confidence that one can create social change (Diemer et al., 2016).

Possibility of Change

Whereas some students critiqued the schools' practices and inequities, some advocated for action to deviate from the status quo. When asked about how teachers' knowledge of students' home lives might impact their teaching, Steven states: "I think they would get a better understanding of the student. They'll know if a student's feeling a type of way, they'll understand why."

Steven articulates a nuanced understanding of the limitations of traditional teacher-student relationships that many educators engage with students in a detached, one-dimensional manner, failing to contextualize students' behaviors, emotions, and engagement levels. This contextualization is a key aspect of the cultural competence construct of CRP. His response suggests that when teachers lack cultural competence and an understanding of students' lived realities, they are less equipped to recognize and respond appropriately to emotional, behavioral, or academic struggles.

When asked how this understanding would improve the school experience, Steven states: "Because if the teachers and staff, they all knew about you, it would be better, because I feel like the student…he'll feel more connected with them…and so

would they, so it would be better for the both of them." Steven's reflections highlight a key aspect of Black boys' agency and awareness in educational spaces, the ability to identify institutional shortcomings and advocate for systemic improvements that prioritize relationship-building over surface-level teaching. His responses reveal an expectation that teachers and school leaders should actively work to understand students' lives beyond the classroom, as this relational investment fosters both emotional and academic engagement. His insights also underscore the reciprocal nature of connection in school settings, when teachers take the time to understand their students, it not only benefits the students but also enhances the relational dynamic between teachers and their classes.

Steven goes on to discuss the student council, where some students are given the opportunity to share their opinions about the school to the administrators, who listen and enact change based on the student representatives. Importantly, Steven reflects that the school student council is made up of only white students, despite the school population being 66% students of color. The white majority of the student council could reinforce, and also be a product of, the culture gap as the educators are majority white, as well. Increased Black students being offered involvement in the student council could help mediate the culture gap and promote mattering for Black boys, because their opinions and thoughts could make significant change in the school.

Despite these dynamics, Steven has hope that teachers would listen to Black boys if they were given a formal opportunity to share their thoughts about the school, he says: "I feel like if they (Black boys) were to speak up about what they feel, I feel like the teachers would look into that, but I don't know if it would be final." His cautious optimism that teachers would listen if Black boys spoke up also reflects his

earlier sentiments of finding it difficult to initiate these conversations. Given the power dynamics in school, teachers should take the responsibility to diversify the voices on the student council.

Black boys' agency in advocating for themselves highlights the effects of the culture gap that emerges in the differences between their lived experiences and academic goals and teachers' assumptions of them. While self-advocacy can foster mattering when teachers respond positively, it also underscores the need for educators to meet students halfway by proactively offering support and guidance.

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study aimed to explore how Black boys' descriptions of their relationships and interactions with their teachers, and resulting perceptions of mattering, can be understood using culturally relevant pedagogy and the culture gap. I analyzed these descriptions by merging the constructs of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) with Carey's (2019) theory of Black boy mattering to understand how Black boys perceived supportive and unsupportive relationships with their teachers and greater school climate, and the effect they had on their perceived mattering. The participants' narratives reveal that their experiences of mattering in school are shaped by teachers' investment, care, and protection. Whereas their unsupportive relationships with teachers, and resulting perceptions of marginal mattering, involved targeting, surface-level teaching, and punitive discipline approaches. Across their narratives, the boys maintained a level of awareness of the racialized dynamics in school and practiced agency in different ways.

This study found that Black boys experienced mattering when educators invested in their success, held them to high expectations, and took a humanizing approach to educating and interacting with them. Educators prioritizing academic success is a particularly salient element of CRP for Black boys due to the pervasive stereotypes and assumptions that Black boys are anti-intelligent (Allen, 2017). Thus, when teachers demonstrated belief in the academic success of the Black boys in this study, they also articulated feelings of mattering, particularly perceiving feeling

valued and important, because this signaled that teachers saw them as capable human beings beyond negative stereotypes.

Students interpreted teacher's investment as a sign they are valued and important to the teacher, reflecting Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) mattering theory that people experience a sense of mattering when they are noticed and cared for. These findings also reflect those of Nelson (2016) that teachers who Black boys perceived as most effective, viewed their students holistically, personally advocated for them, and consistently engaged with them through reaching out. Teacher investment, high expectations, support for students' future academic endeavors, and holistic personal approach were also salient findings in Brooms (2021) retrospective study on the high school experiences of high achieving Black young men. His study highlights how these experiences were critical to their positive experiences in school and later academic success. These parallels reinforce the findings of these studies and contribute to discourse on how Black boys are best supported in school.

Black boys perceived their mattering from educators who went above and beyond instruction, specifically by taking a humanizing approach to their teaching. This concept aligns with Freire's (1968) anti-banking model, which underpins CRP and other asset pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; hooks, 1994). Freire (1968) advocates for educators to see students as more than an empty mind for knowledge to be passively dumped into, he believes for education be most effective, students' full humanity must be recognized. The humanizing aspects I pulled out from students' narratives involved teachers' engaging them in conversation, making intentional efforts to relate to them, and fostering personal connections. Relating to students and getting to know them on a personal level has implications for teachers' ability to build

bridges between their communities and cultural knowledge to scaffold school curriculum. For example, in Ladson-Billings' (2022) landmark Dreamkeepers study, she describes how a successful teacher integrated a popular Hip Hop artist's music into language lessons, which leveraged students' cultural knowledge and interests to increase their academic engagement and understanding. This technique also aligns with Freire's beliefs of connecting education to students' lived experiences (Freire, 1968).

Holistic pedagogy is well articulated by hooks' Engaged Pedagogy (1994), as a practice of teaching that nurtures students on a human level, by recognizing their mind, body, and soul as salient to the classroom. hooks advocates for seeing students as whole beings with unique needs and strengths, by their teachers, for education to work towards students' self-actualization in realms including and outside of academic success (hooks, 1994). She believes that teachers must take the opportunity to learn about and with their students (hooks, 1994). The participants' emphasis on connecting and conversing with teachers about non- academic topics strongly aligns with the work of hooks, Freire, and Ladson-Billings. Taking a humanizing approach in the classroom also aligns with Carey's (2019) conceptualization of comprehensive mattering, the most robust type of mattering in his framework. Comprehensive mattering emphasizes the need for the adaptation of schools to be an environment where Black students are holistically valued (Carey, 2019). Comprehensive mattering requires educators to recognize and prioritize the significance of Black students' life experiences in the broader goal of educating them to reach their full potential, as holistic humans.

One of the barriers to students' perceived mattering was the teachers who failed to implement the relational, academic, and critical constructs of CRP. This failure resulted in participants' descriptions of those teachers as not invested and disconnected from them. As articulated by a few of the students, some teachers did not take the time and effort to build relationships with the students, which demonstrates that they fail to humanize students and solely view them as objective learners, which reinforced a sense of invisibility aligned with marginal mattering (Carey, 2019, 2020). The participants articulated that they felt that they mattered to their teachers when their teachers acted invested in their future and life. For instance, Mrs. Kent is frequently mentioned for providing academic support, college preparation, and life guidance. Her approach aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1995) model of a warm demander, a teacher who believes students are capable of academic success and takes responsibility for students achieving it. These findings reflect those of previous studies that caring, connected, and approachable teachers positively impact students' academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Hargrave et al., 2016, Hudley & Daoud, 2008; Komarraju et al., 2010).

One of important elements of participants' narratives related to teachers' lack of care, and resulted in marginal mattering, was the racialized nature of school discipline. The disproportionate implementation of discipline between Black boys and white students, particularly for minor infractions, made them feel hyper-policed and reinforced their marginal mattering as targets or criminals. The participants describe some administrators as actively seeking to push Black boys out of the school by targeting them. Whereas they describe that their Black administration sought to understand the root of the issue rather than escalating to punitive measures. Thus,

discipline may be reinforcing school norms in alignment with white culture, if some administrations find white students' actions acceptable and Black students' actions as punishable.

These findings signal the embeddedness of racism in the structures and processes in the school. Especially due to Black boys describing white administrators as prioritizing punishment and Black administrators as less punitive and more restorative. This is particularly troubling as discipline practices are one of the main mechanisms of the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba, 2011). These findings are consistent with those of existing literature finding that low cultural competence among teachers tends to be related to disproportionate punishment for Black boys (Alexander, 2015; Ross & Stevenson, 2018). They also reflect McKinney de Royston and colleagues (2020) findings that Black teachers demonstrate caring relationships and alternatives to punitive discipline in order to protect Black students from experiencing racialized harm. These findings also align with this study in terms of Black educators' investment in their Black student's well-being and success demonstrated through academic and interpersonal check ins.

This study serves as evidence of the culture gap due to the boys' perceptions of their white and Black administrators and educators. They articulated more understanding and cultural competency from Black educators and administrators. They also perceived more willingness to engage in conversation and interest in their lives from Black educators, administrators, and staff. Compared to their white educators who sometimes displayed indifferent attitudes towards students' struggles and implemented more punitive practices. These findings align with those of Easton-

brooks (2021) who demonstrated that ethnoracial matching between students and teachers resulted in higher quality of relationships.

Despite the challenges that Black boys face in their school, they actively engaged in self-advocacy and strategic visibility demonstrating their agency and awareness as a response to their marginalizing environment. Charles and Sa(man)tha demonstrate purposeful academic engagement and participation in extracurriculars to challenge stereotypes. Instead of resigning to the structural challenges and neglect, that Black boys are subjected to in school, they pushed back and demonstrated resilience and resistance. This finding further refutes the narrow conception that Black boys are "at-risk" and need to be saved (Nelson, 2016) which can negatively impact how teachers view Black boys. These findings also reflect those of Carey and collaborators (2022) that Black boys monitor the way that they were perceived in class, to counter stereotypes, actively resist marginal mattering, and want to be appreciated holistically, instead of selectively. Additionally, this study confirms other work that illustrates how even in the face of stereotypes, deficit assumptions, and a lack of institutional support, Black boys strive to reach their full potential (Allen, 2017; Brooms, 2021; Brooms, 2016; Carey, 2018).

As adolescents develop stronger socio-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and perspective-taking (Brizio et al., 2015; Quintana & McKown, 2007), they become increasingly aware of how racialized school experiences, discrimination, and structural inequities are connected to historical and contemporary oppression (i.e., critical consciousness) (Bañales, et al., 2024; Diemer et al., 2016). The participants in this study demonstrated a critical awareness of how they were perceived and stereotyped by their teachers and took intentional steps to challenge negative assumptions, by

engaging academically, seeking positive relationships with educators, and self-advocating for their needs. Carey and collaborators' (2025) study demonstrates how amid the Covid-19 pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020, Black boys developed their critical consciousness through reflections on systemic inequities, particularly in school settings, reinforcing my findings that Black boys are highly aware of the racialized dynamics shaping their experiences. They described how their marginal mattering was reinforced through educators' disengagement with racial justice issues and their lack of effort in fostering meaningful relationships with Black students.

Thus, Black boys do not passively accept marginalization; rather, they actively navigate and resist the racialized expectations imposed upon them (Rogers & Way, 2016). These findings also align with broader research on adolescent identity development, which highlights how school climates and relational interactions shape students' trajectories, self-perceptions, and aspirations (Verhoeven et al., 2019). These findings, along with previous literature, also demonstrate how school is a salient context for Black boys and experiencing mattering shapes their self-concept across academic, social, and personal domains (Carey, 2019, 2020; Carey et al., 2022a; Marshall et al., 2010; Tucker et al., 2010).

These findings speak to the nuanced reasons why Black boys' experience varying levels of support and mattering in school. The lack of adaptation and cultural relevancy from educators lead to Black boys' failing to receive the support they need for success. These practices also do not comprehensively affirm Black boys' sense of mattering, whereas teachers engaging in active investment, high expectations, adaptive teaching, and restorative discipline served to bolster their perceived mattering. Their narratives illustrated the tension between the students' awareness of marginalization

and systemic forces on their student agency and resilience, which led to them learning how to navigate and resist racialized challenges in school.

Limitations

A major strength, but also a simultaneous limitation, for this paper is that there is no data from teachers, just articulations from the students themselves. While this allowed me to solely focus on interpreting student voices without the direct influence of others' perspectives, it also constricts the picture I can paint of the boys' school environment since we did not explore teacher's perceptions, constraints, and motivations. Like most qualitative studies, this research is based on a small sample of students thus, this study is not generalizable. It is important to note that the experiences of these five participants is unique to their context, background, and more thus, it does not represent the schooling experience of every Black boy. These findings are transferable and can be used to inform educators of Black adolescent boys in similar contexts. This analysis would have been strengthened by member checking and participant collaboration, which were not possible due to participants having graduated from County.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Implications

The findings of this study provide crucial implications for scholars and practitioners. It is important to transform the words of these boys into actionable strategies to implement in practice, theory, and research to facilitate more positive academic, social, and individual outcomes for Black students. Thus, I offer several recommendations based on these findings.

The first recommendation for practice from this analysis is that it is important that educators provide consistent academic and relational support, by initiating conversations and personal connections. A common thread within Black boys' articulations of instances when they perceived that they mattered in school was when their teacher offered individualized academic support, that they could depend on, and held them to high expectations. Dee says he knows he is valued when an adult "gets on" him about his grades. This study provided evidence that teachers who embodied the warm demander model from Ladson-Billings (1995) by balancing demanding academic success with care, to help students achieve such success, were key to affirming Black boys' sense of comprehensive mattering. Inherent in this model is that teachers see students as holistic beings, they are human before they are academic learners. Thus, students of color must be supported socially, emotionally, and intellectually via culturally responsive mechanisms that build on their inherent strengths (Barnes, 2019). To provide individualized support to meet students where

they are, the curricula must be adaptable. Providing additional support to those who need it is an important part of reaching equity in students' outcomes. The boys' narratives support the notion that teachers who went beyond standard instruction fostered feelings of mattering by making them feel important and valued.

Secondly, it is critical that educators learn from teachers with positive relationships with Black students to work toward mediating the culture gap. The findings supported that positive forms of mattering were fostered by educators that students had positive relationships with. It is crucial that institutions recognize these successful teachers and work to retain and support them. Recognizing their strengths in supporting the mattering of Black students is one way to do so. The predominately white teacher workforce must learn from the practices of their Black colleagues, community, researchers, and scholars on how to engage with their Black students to mitigate the effects of the culture gap.

Finally, one of the most troubling themes from the boys' responses is how they articulated white teachers and administrators engaging in punitive and disproportionate discipline and targeting practices. They described their Black educators as more understanding of their upbringing and homelife thus, they provided guidance and support rather than defaulting to discipline. It is important that all educators practice awareness of the disproportionate targeting of Black boys and move to engage in restorative justice practices rather than punitive.

Disproportionate discipline is often framed as the main mechanism of school exclusion in the school to prison pipeline, but this study highlights marginal mattering as another key mechanism through which exclusion operates. The boys' experiences reveal that while punishment is a problem, they also experienced marginal mattering

through problematic treatment including being dismissed, ignored, and unsupported. Theoretical underpinnings of racialized discipline should include the resulting marginal mattering of Black boys, that they matter to be disregarded and criminalized.

One major implication for theory from this study is that CRP is often skewed in practice to superficial inclusions of content, such as historical lessons or holiday celebrations (King & Brown, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014; Woodson, 2016). These findings demonstrate that some of the most important constructs of CRP are relational. These need to be emphasized in professional development and teacher training in order to facilitate comprehensive mattering for Black students, and particularly Black boys. Given the evidence that white educators demonstrate lower relational engagement with Black boys, specific efforts must be taken to interrupt the embedded structural racism implemented by this group to avoid the marginal mattering of Black boys and other targeted students.

The findings from this study also suggest that mattering should be an explicit component of asset pedagogies, since it plays a key role in Black boys' positive experiences of teachers and in school. Mattering validates their academic potential and affirms their importance in the school community. By including exemplary behaviors of teachers that student perceived they matter to, asset pedagogies can disseminate these skills to the majority white teacher workforce and work towards mediating the culture gap.

For researchers, it is key to emphasize the voices of Black students in research that directly pertains to them. This helps ensure that research is humanizing and recognizes their strengths and resilience rather than deficits. It also repositions Black boys as active agents in shaping new knowledge about themselves rather than passive

subjects. It is crucial to take into consideration how systemic and structural racism shapes their experiences and worldview. Another key aspect of research is emphasizing action based on the findings of studies. To create meaningful change, researchers must not only identify issues but also disseminate their findings and recommendations back to the school and community via collaborative relationships. Future studies should explore how the principles of mattering, undergirded by CRP, can be translated into actionable curriculum additives, professional development, and school policy.

This study highlights the crucial role of school environments in fostering Black boys' sense of mattering and shaping their self-concepts. However, it is critical to keep outside-of-school factors like students' family, community, and broader social contexts in mind as they significantly impact students' educational experiences and developmental trajectories (Milner, 2015a). Given that family involvement is a key determinant of educational success, as noted by Milner et al. (2015a), it is crucial to explore how school-family partnerships can be strengthened to reinforce students' sense of mattering and overall well-being.

Findings from this present study illustrate that Black boys felt a greater sense of mattering when educators took an interest in them as a person. This speaks to the importance of family involvement in education because when schools actively engage with families, they signal that they recognize students as whole individuals, whose identities and success are shaped by their familial relationships (Nelson et al., 2020). Future research should investigate how schools can adopt family-centered frameworks to better understand students' lived experiences and explore how mattering approaches within students' families can inform effective pedagogical strategies. As well as how

integrating perspectives from students' family support systems and teachers' pedagogy can work in tandem with to support Black boys comprehensive mattering and overall success. Thus, taking a holistic approach that acknowledges that Black boys' development is not solely influenced by school environments, but by the interplay between home, community, and institutional contexts (Milner, 2015a; Nelson et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The current study demonstrated the mechanisms through which Black boys' educational experiences and perceptions of their mattering are shaped by their educators' pedagogical practices and the culture gap. These findings support much work on this topic that Black boys often experience marginalization in school through intentional racialized practices in interpersonal interactions with educators as well as discipline (Bryan, 2022; Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011). Also, in line with pre-existing literature these findings support that ethnoracial matching between teachers and students is characterized by positive relationships, communication, and a natural practice of cultural competence (Dee, 2004; Easton-Brooks et al., 2010, Easton-Brooks, 2021; Egalite et al., 2015). Importantly, these findings support the agency and awareness of Black boys in navigating their environments and advocating for their success. This study works to validate and amplify the voices of Black boys in discussions of their schooling experiences and outcomes.

The goal of this study was to intentionally cross-pollinate culturally relevant pedagogy with the construct of mattering and Carey's (2019, 2020) framework for Black adolescent boys' experiences of mattering. A key contribution from this study is

the robust evidence that elements of CRP, particularly demanding academic success and taking responsibility for students, was correlated with their articulations of mattering in the classroom. One may say that engaging in these behaviors is "just good teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but it is racially and culturally entrenched as to do so teachers must push back on their unconscious, or conscious, assumptions based on negative and deficit social stereotypes of Black youth. Ladson-Billings (1995) affirms that while these practices are good teaching, why are we not always seeing them in all classrooms with Black youth?

One of the gaps that this study aimed to fill was exploring school experiences from the perspectives and narratives of Black boys. The disservice of Black boys by America's public schools is often studied through their standardized testing outcomes, teacher's surveys, and other explorations of the adults around them. It is important to bring the voices that this research aims to address directly into research.

By cross-pollinating these theories, I embraced the strengths and pervasiveness of CRP while uplifting the power of mattering theory and its place in pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2014) agrees that it is important to adapt asset pedagogies to reflect culture's fluid nature. Thus, by extending CRP to explicitly include mattering (value, importance, and reliance) and comprehensive mattering, this study broadens the scope of CRP and provides a nuanced framework for understanding how to best support students of color.

By cross-pollinating CRP with mattering theory, this study helps make sense of how educators' practices shape Black boys' experiences of mattering within the educational environment. These findings call attention to the importance of seeing Black boys as holistic individuals whose sense of mattering is intertwined with the

quality of their relationships with teachers. Throughout this research, I demonstrate that it is not just the school environment that impacts their experiences, but the relational dynamics cultivated within classrooms. When teachers affirm students' identities, maintain high expectations, and build strong and positive relationships, they communicate to Black boys that they are valued, important, and matter to them.

The title of this study highlights the centrality of teacher relationships in shaping Black students' schooling experiences. Ultimately, this study calls for educators to reflect on their practices and encourages them to go beyond surface-level interactions to invest in fostering environments where Black boys can resolutely infer their mattering. In doing so, schools fulfil their role as equitable spaces that support each student in reaching their full potential.

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Appendix A

CODEBOOK AND DEFINITIONS

Code	Definition of Code
Comprehensive Mattering	This code is assigned when participants discuss their "full self" or what a world where Black boys mattered look like.
Marginal Mattering	This code is assigned when participants discuss how Black boys and/or men and individuals matter marginally (e.g., are demeaned or stereotyped as criminals, thugs, or drug dealers)
Partial Mattering	This code is assigned when participants discuss how Black boys and/or men and individuals matter as or are stereotyped as athletes, entertainers, or even heroes. These are limited and confining roles.
School Climate & Culture	This code is assigned when participants describe elements of the broader school climate or school culture.
Perceived mattering	This code is assigned when participants articulate how/when they feel they matter or do not matter.
Perspective on teachers	This code is assigned when participants describe their perspectives on teachers.
Perspectives on administrators or deans	This code is assigned when participants describe their perspectives on any school administrator.
Perspectives on discipline	This code is assigned when participants reveal their insights on the disciplinary policies and practices at the school.
Positive relationships with teachers	This code will be applied when students articulate experiencing supportive and encouraging interactions with teachers characterized by mutual respect, comfort, fairness, and a preference for learning from them.
Negative relationships with teachers	This code will be applied when students articulate experiencing relational strain and conflict with teachers, shown by a lack of support, feelings of disrespect, and overall disengagement.

Culturally relevant practices	This code will be applied when teachers demonstrate culturally relevant practices through behaviors that demand academic success, encourage personal responsibility, promote cultural competence, respect students, view students as holistic individuals, and foster equitable relationships with all students.
Assimilationist practices	This code will be applied when teachers exhibit assimilationist practices that undermine Black students by upholding the status quo and perpetuating marginalization, characterized by discriminatory behavior, stereotyping, anti-Black racism, and disproportionate disciplinary practices.
Sub-Codes	
Demanding academic success	This code will be applied when students articulate that their teacher's actions or behavior make them feel capable of achieving academic success.
Taking personal responsibility	This code will be applied when students describe their teacher as taking responsibility to help them succeed academically, demonstrating a commitment to their progress.
Cultural competence	This code will be applied when students feel their teacher understands their home culture and/or upbringing and intentionally affirms their culture or racial group as belonging in academic spaces.
Respect for students	This code will be applied when students perceive that their teacher makes an effort to respect and appreciate their diverse backgrounds and/or cultures.
Seeing students as individual holistic beings	This code will be applied when students express that their teacher is interested in connecting with them as whole individuals, beyond just their academic performance.
Equitable relationships with all students	This code will be applied when students feel that their teacher values all students equally, avoiding favoritism and demonstrating fairness in their interactions.
Discriminatory behavior toward students	This code will be applied when students describe experiences of discrimination directed toward Black students or other students of color.
Stereotyping	This code will be applied when students observe that a teacher holds stereotypical beliefs, by assuming that all members of a race share specific characteristics or abilities, implying racial inferiority or superiority.
Anti-black racism	This code will be applied when students describe instances where they feel targeted or treated unfairly due to negative attitudes or biases specifically against Black individuals.
Disproportionate disciplinary practices	This code will be applied when students perceive that disciplinary actions are enforced more harshly or frequently on Black students compared to their peers.