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CONCEPTUALIZING WAKANDA HIGH: INFORMING CRITICALLY CONSCIOUS  
INSTITUTIONS TO IMPACT BLACK STUDENTS' RESILIENCE

by

Jessica Felicia Henderson

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Leadership and Policy Studies

The University of Memphis

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have pushed me for longer than I can remember. To my entire family, you have spoken nothing but life into me. I've felt the encouragement of each of you throughout this process and could not have done this without the network of support you have created throughout my life. To my parents, Nathaniel Henderson and Karen Henderson, you have been my support system since day one. I run full speed at every challenge because you prepared me and I know you will be there if I should stumble. It is your belief in me that sustains me in rough times and your ever-present love that drives me to be the best that I can be. To my sisters, Nathalie and Linzy, who know me better than I know myself. Our constant laughs and stress relief sessions have helped me persevere through this process. You inspire me and I hope to continue to make you proud. To Jeremy, thank you for understanding the sleepless nights and quieting my biggest doubts. Your unwavering belief in me was often exactly what I needed to continue.

I also dedicate this work to family that has finished their earthly journey but whose love still sustains me. Bernice Holt, Dr. Nola Holt Royster, and Curtistine Miller, there are no words to express how much you each impacted my life. Throughout this process, I've heard your oft repeated words of encouragement and felt your comforting presence, pushing me through when I thought I had nothing left.

To my students, who have taught me more than I could have ever taught them. Teaching you opened my eyes to the impact educators have on the lives of students across this nation. Your tenacity and unwillingness to be anything but your authentic selves challenged me and pushed me to be better at every turn. You are the reason this

work is important and the lessons I learned from you at Raleigh Egypt Middle in Memphis, TN live throughout this paper. I hope you hear your voices here.

Finally, this work is dedicated to the late Rev. George O. McCalep, Jr. and the Greenforest Christian Academy where my educational journey began. It was the foundation I gained there, starting in Mrs. Lorraine Edwards' Pre-K classroom, that taught me "who I am and whose I am". My passion for education was sparked and I never stopped searching for a place that embraced and nurtured Black students the way I was nurtured at Greenforest. It is my hope that this work supports the work of creating a 'Greenforest' for Black students across this nation.

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## ABSTRACT

Black students in the United States are permanently operating within systemically inequitable environments that produce inequitable outcomes. Despite these circumstances, they exhibit resilience and overcome challenges to ultimately succeed. This study proposes a *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* that illustrates the impact of critically conscious educational institutions on the resilience of Black Students. The framework is meant to inform the educational environments that help Black students deal with the sustained adversity of functioning within anti-Black systems and consider narratives of current and former Black students to explore the various characteristics of institutions on their own resilience capacity. The *CCI Framework* seeks to support the ability of institutions to address the education debt owed to Black students that has been traditionally neglected as a society.

Using a transcendental phenomenological methodology, a purposive, nonrandom sample of Black students currently enrolled in a degree seeking college program were interviewed using a protocol of questions aligned to each research question and the core components of the study's theoretical framework: antiblackness, social ecological model of resilience, Afrocentricity, and critical consciousness by way of transformative potential. This provided the opportunity to collect the lived experiences of Black students and to analyze their responses using a phenomenological analysis protocol.

Findings suggest four themes that serve to answer the research questions addressed by the study. Schools will either negatively or positively impact personal resilience capacity based on the way they *center blackness* and depending on whether they *promote a collectivist culture*. *Providing freedom to define success* to students is a

schooling experience that greatly impacts the success level of Black graduates of K-12 schools. Finally, institutions that *actively care* provide the quality, nurturing environment needed to support resilience by buffering the effects of adverse situations that put children at risk for negative outcomes. These findings support the conclusion that the *CCI Framework* informs transformative potential of institutions given that the surface themes reflect the need to filter critical reflection through the lens of antiblackness that the known tenets of Afrocentricity exists within the critical action institutions should take to positively impact the resilience capacity of students.

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## Conceptualizing Wakanda high: Informing critically conscious institutions to impact Black students' resilience

Adversity is the birthright of Black people in a country that centers power in anti-black systems and populations. Across economic, social, political, and educational systems, Black people in the United States operate within systemically inequitable environments that produce inequitable outcomes (Daly, Hobijn, & Pedtke, 2017). In education specifically, these outcomes are viewed most often through a variety of quantitative measures including relatively low graduation rates (Lynn et al., 2010), high identification for special education services (Ferri & Conner, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002), and disproportion in the frequency and intensity of discipline (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011). Black students graduate from high school at a rate lower than the average for public school students, 78 percent compared to 85 percent. In fact, this gap is even wider between White and Black students as White students graduate at a rate of 89 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In special education, although the percentage of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is relatively similar for White (14 percent) and Black (16 percent) students, only 64 percent of those Black students graduate with a regular high school diploma. Comparatively, 74 percent of White students served under IDEA graduate with a regular high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, a more complete story is often told through the use of Black students' stories about their experiences in K-12 education which highlight inequity in social and psychological factors that make up the day to day lives of Black students (Harper & Davis, 2012). Ferguson (2003) speaks to teacher perceptions of black students that have consequential, negative impacts on the social experiences of Black students in schools. For example, Zimmermann (2018) discusses that upon closer

examination of the perception advantage girls are often said to have over boys in early education, this gap doesn't exist for Black girls based on teacher perception of problem behaviors and student-teacher conflict. In another relevant study, after reading vignettes about defiant students, teachers were found to be more likely to believe that Black students would misbehave in the future than White students (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). It is then fair to suggest that as students of color navigate these systems, particularly the educational institutions with which they engage almost daily, they carry the additional burden of self-preservation within a traditionally hostile environment (Kohli, 2018; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). This understanding exposes that, at their core, the educational experiences of students of color are inequitable from the start.

Expectedly, the literature on inequity in education is expansive with much of it historically focusing on gaps in achievement through the lens of success indicators such as graduation rates and test scores (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Reardon, 2013) and considering circumstances, such as poverty and class, in a way that recognizes the disproportionate impact on Black communities but does not centralize race as a factor for consideration (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Omi & Winant, 2014). However, the centralization of race is important to the conversation because Black students are existing, and often succeeding, in oppressive environments that perpetuate the aforementioned gaps in academic success. This shows that despite the layered systems of oppression with which they interact daily, Black students exhibit a tenacity and strength that suggest the efforts to develop 'grit' and 'perseverance' in daily character lessons in an attempt to prepare Black students to 'overcome the achievement gap' may be misappropriated (Golden, 2017; Harper & Davis, 2012). Realigning our effort on

conceptualizing the responsibility of the system to adapt: to change itself and to begin the payment of its debt to Black students versus asking its students to develop skill sets to survive its ill, is potentially a more ethical direction for our considerations around reform.

A well-known quote by James Baldwin (1961) states that “to be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time” (p. 205) and speaks to the oft-documented reality of the Black experience in the United States. It continues, “... so that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you” (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 205). The latter portion of the quote, while less widely repeated, arguably describes the struggle in which Black people spend the majority of their lives engaged. Controlling the rage as an act of self-preservation is the birthright of Black people in a world that centers power in anti-black systems and populations.

Canham (2017) identified destructive consequences, psychological release of pent up anger, and the simultaneous expression of self-love as results of that rage. Students in schools must deal with and perform in spite of this rage and as such, it is damning to their success to decouple racism from the equity conversation in schools.

When Ladson-Billings and Tate (2016) built upon the idea found in Critical Race Theory (CRT) proposing “an assumption that racism is not a series of isolated acts, but is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically” (p. 52), they pushed for the inclusion of race in the conversation of education equity.

However, exploring inequity through the lens of adversity specific to Black bodies existing in an anti-Black world is not nearly as common as it should be in the education literature considering the ‘endemic’ nature of racism. When adversity is defined in this way, it opens a door to considering the resilience of Black students across the country,

surviving (and often thriving) in a system built and sustained by their own dehumanization. It is this resilience that is the result of Baldwin's allusion to controlling the rage to prevent destruction and it is this resilience that should not be put solely on the backs of Black students to nurture and strengthen.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Historically, Black people have survived environments catastrophic to both their physical and material well-being. Even in just the narrow view of Black people in the United States, the community has survived chattel slavery, legal dehumanization, and state-sanctioned violence. Acknowledgement of survival, and most importantly success, within the Black community across fields despite these realities allows for a shift in perspective from the lens of equipping Black people with skills to survive to shifting realities of the institutions with which they engage. The insistent focus of the education community on the *achievement gap* and the skills students need to overcome it is what stands in the way of us addressing what Ladson-Billings (2006) called the education debt, further conceptualizing it as the historical, economic, socio political, and moral debt we have constructed and neglected as a society. Therefore, the critical problem of this study is that the responsibility of the institution to adapt, to change itself, and to begin the payment of its debt to Black students is not currently addressed by interventions that are specific to the antiblackness that is the core of their inequitable realities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to propose a *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* that illustrates the impact of critically conscious educational institutions on the resilience of Black students. The framework specifically informs educational

environments that help Black students deal with the sustained adversity of functioning within anti-Black systems. This model is a necessity due to a social ecological model of resilience that supports a focus, not on resilience of students as individual traits that make them invulnerable, but on the potential for growth and resiliency mitigated by the characteristics of the environment in which students learn. I seek to propose a framework that informs a focus on *institutional change as intervention*; encouraging resilience in Black students through development of more critically conscious policies and leaders, rather than through individual student development of survival skills, such as *grit*, to overcome adversity. It is also the purpose of the study to consider the narratives of current and former Black students, who were educated in institutions that exhibit varied levels of critical consciousness, in order to explore the impact - if any - of these institutions on the resilience of the students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study seek to elicit information that informs the creation of a *critically conscious institution framework*. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are Black graduates of K-12 schools' perspectives of school-related factors impacting their personal resilience capacity?
2. What schooling experiences of Black graduates of K-12 schools most impact their level of success?
3. What are the characteristics of school environments that Black graduates of K-12 schools perceive as nurturing and positively impacting their resilience?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The *critical conscious institution framework* is guided by four concepts: (a) resilience capacity; (b) critical consciousness; (c) Afrocentric thought; (d) antiblackness. It emerges from themes within the literature around each of these concepts. Resilience capacity consists of an individual's (a) sense of mastery, (b) sense of relatedness, and (c) emotional reactivity (Prince-Embury, 2011). Factors relating to the resilience of students include the realm of control for schools as institutions with the understanding that the schools that students attend everyday can act as quality environment (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). Specifically for African-Americans, the conversation on resilience includes clearly defining the term and determining their own specific perspectives of success (Graham & Anderson, 2008). The measurement of resilience capacity with this framework will be defined through these lenses of success along with more traditional measures of educational success, such as college enrollment.

As the framework rests on the idea of blackness as adversity, it is crucial to consider the outcomes of antiblackness in the discussion of success and resilience. The capacity of students to successfully operate in antiblack systems in many ways depends upon their own perspectives of Blackness (Graham & Anderson, 2008). This is key to the utilization of critical consciousness as an intervention within the proposed framework. Critical consciousness has two components: critical reflection and critical action (Freire, 2018). These components operate within a framework of transformative potential which I use to suggest that institutions have the opportunity to increase their ability to support the resilience capacity of students. By viewing the institution as the people that make it up, this framework provides a structure for informing policy decisions within schools that



directly improve the transformative potential of schools. Given that the transformation focus is on resilience capacity for Black students, those policy decisions should be informed by ideas that would be expected to improve that capacity. Specifically, the different ideas that distinguish Eurocentric and Afrocentric thought must be understood in order to inform policy that is tailored for the improvement of Black student resilience. If the experiences of black students in schools are negatively impacted by the outcomes of antiblackness in this country, such as disproportionately high rates of poverty, teacher perceptions that impact student outcomes, and gaps in graduation and academic score rates, then attempts to improve those experiences must directly combat antiblackness. Therefore, this framework suggest that policy concerning hiring, culture, and instruction in schools should intentionally respond to the antiblack factors that mitigate the experience of black students in schools. One way to achieve this is to inform policy with themes of Afrocentric thought. Johnson (2001) discusses using Afrocentric thought, characterized by (a) sense of connectedness, (b) integrity of community, and (c) right-to-be, as a tool for improving resilience. This framework suggests that institutions themselves must use the tool in order to improve its own critical consciousness and in turn become better quality environments for Black students. Each of these parts will be integrated to view schools as critically conscious and the critical conscious institution framework will be the lens for this study.

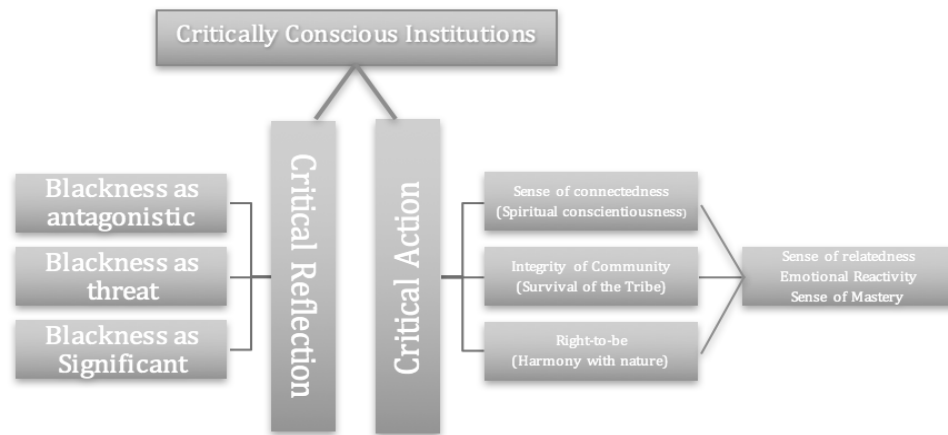


Figure 1. Conceptual model depicting the *Critically Conscious Institution Framework*

Figure 1 summarizes the integration of each concept into a *critically conscious institution framework*. The transformative potential of critical consciousness is based upon an individual’s (or institution’s) ability to both critically reflect and take critical action (Freire, 2018; Jemal, 2017). The CCI framework proposes intentionality in these processes. Due to the endemic and permanent nature of antiblackness in K-12 schools, the framework suggests that in order to increase transformational potential of schools for Black students’ resilience, core understandings of antiblackness must be centered during the critical reflection and critical action of schools. Critical reflection on the ideas of ‘blackness as threats’ and ‘blackness as antagonistic’ to humanity (Dumas, 2016) serve to inform the focus on ‘blackness as significant’ in planning critical action. Given that blackness is significant- *it matters*- Afrocentric thought can be channeled to focus intervention and utilize principles of Nguzo Saba to inform institutional practice. The framework suggests that in informing critical action using Afrocentric principles, the school environment becomes a more appropriate setting to nurture each of the three components of resilience capacity in Black students.

## **Significance of the Study**

The centralization of the endemic nature of antiblackness in our society is a core factor of this study and centers experiences unique to a group historically marginalized in the educational system. Demanding intervention in the name of equity, I propose that a student's Blackness naturally places them not in a position of deficiency, but of adversity within schools. Schools which mirror the antiblackness of society by design due to historical context, simultaneously attempt to develop resilience in the very students their systems and cultures often marginalize. Stewart (2004) highlights differences in emphasis, values, and ethical orientation between Afrocentric and Eurocentric worldviews. These differences are integral for educational leaders to consider in determining school culture. In schools informed by Eurocentric thought, Black students could be negatively impacted by the very culture and climate of the school in disproportionate numbers. Therefore, in an attempt to broaden the discussion around resilience in education, this study will offer a framework informed by Black students' perspectives and the core tenets of Afrocentric thought that focuses not on how to improve the resilience of students but instead on institutional change that increases the schools' capacity to serve as a quality environment for those students. By informing practice with the understandings and perspectives of Black students and Afrocentric thought, I also add intentionality to the resilience conversation surrounding Black students in this country by centering an alternative way of knowing. Though certainly not the only adverse experience with explanatory power that Black students have, the burden of operating in a racist system is a specific and significant stressor that should be considered when developing quality environments for Black students. Centering their

voices in the discussion around how leaders can provide those quality environments supports rethinking how we structure schools in a way that is equitable and socially just.

### **Organization of the Study**

The study is organized into five chapters. In chapter one, the concept of blackness as adversity was introduced and a *critically conscious institution framework* was presented as an intervention to impact resilience of Black students. The background of the study was given in order to provide context and the critical problem and research questions were presented. In an attempt to provide clarity behind the why of the study, the purpose and significance were also provided. In chapter two, a review of the literature is presented and captures the scope of the literature around critical consciousness, inequitable outcomes based on race in education, resilience capacity, and Afrocentric thought. The research methodology, which expounded upon the study's use of phenomenological study design, is described in chapter three. In chapter four, the results from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed and identified themes were presented. The findings were discussed in chapter five along with recommendations for future studies.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Black Students' Current Reality in Schools**

An examination of the current realities of Black students in our nation's schools is perhaps the most convincing evidence of the adversity they face daily by simply attending school. Ferguson (2003) discusses the impact of teacher perception and expectation on the outcomes of Black students. The findings highlight that given the substantial amount of time students spend socially interacting with their teachers and

peers in schools, teacher perception will impact the experiences of Black students in ways that range from instructional practice to goals and expectations of schooling.

Papageorge, Gershenson, and Kang (2018) found that increased teacher expectations actually improved students' chances of completing college - a 20 percent increase in expectations resulted in improved chances of about 6 percent in white students and 10 percent in Black students. However, white teachers had significantly higher expectations on average for white students than for black students; highlighting bias in perceptions.

Ferguson (2003) writes, bias in perceptions do not necessarily result in biased behavior.

Instead, he suggests that perceptions relate to student outcomes by becoming a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. To understand this idea, one must consider that bias is often rooted in an acceptance of stereotypes that are held as truths without regard to context, reason, and historical backstory.

For example, the current reality is that while Black students, on average, score lower on achievement measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the *black-white achievement gap* is not a steady immovable force as is often perceived. In fact, Magnuson & Waldfogel (2008) find that once during the 1970s and early 80s and again from 1999 and 2004, the racial achievement gap began to narrow. However, those periods have always been followed by either a widening of the gap or a stagnation in progress that has allowed widespread perceptions of a gap in achievement based on race to persist in the education field.

According to the numbers, these perceptions are founded in truth. On the other hand, the income achievement gap has widened overall over the years and has, in many instances, replaced the conversation on racial inequality in schools. However, the shift in conversation toward addressing income disparity without the context of race is not

prudent given that both the income and racial achievement gaps remain high (Reardon, 2013). One cannot consider the widening income inequality without also noting that the gap negatively impacts Black people in the United States at disproportionate rates. The poverty rate of African Americans stands at about three times that of non-Hispanic Whites in this country, 27.4% and 9.9% respectively (Lichter, Parisi, & Taquino, 2012). Therefore, within this country, the income achievement gap is by and large a racial gap as well. It is for this reason that no matter the title of the gap, it is reasonable to assume that the perceptions teachers hold of Black students would differ than those for White students. Particularly if those perceptions are based on the construction of a connection between past and future group performance. The impact of race on teacher perception is also seen in research that compares the experiences of Black students when taught by teachers of the same race versus those who are not. Redding (2019) reviewed the impact that same race/ethnicity teachers have on ratings of behavior and academic performance, scores on standardized tests, and positive behavioral outcomes. He found that, for Black students, more favorable class behavior and academic performance ratings came from Black teachers and that Black students score higher on achievement tests when they have a Black teacher.

In addition to a negative impact on behavior and academic outcomes based on race, we also see other examples of adverse environments for Black students in schools. The rate at which Black students are identified for special education services and environments has been a cause for concern since *Brown vs Board of Education* mandated the integration of schools. Conner & Ferri (2005) discuss that in Washington, D.C. between 1955 and 1956, only 3 percent of white students were in special education while

over 24 percent of newly admitted Black students were placed in SPED. In those years, SPED enrollment doubled in DC and over 77% of that enrollment was African American. Since then, the contributors to overrepresentation of Black students in special education have been found to connect to a wide variety of factors such as social attitudes, biased intelligence and eligibility testing, and varied expectations of Black students (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford, 2012). Conversely, Black students have been consistently underrepresented in gifted education and Advanced Placement classes; with a percentage of underrepresentation always greater than 40% (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). These stats paint a somber picture of the Black student experience in US schools and contribute to an understanding of the structural realities that contribute to an adverse environment.

Similarly, a look at the discipline outcomes of Black students provides an opportunity to see through the lenses of both the perceptions and actions of school officials and their impact on student experience. The use of suspension and expulsion have an obvious impact on academic achievement for any student given that time out of the classroom results in loss of instructional opportunity. These practices are often disproportionately utilized against minority students and, as Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) suggests, this *discipline gap* could contribute directly to the gaps we see in the experiences Black students have in schools as compared to those of White students. Wallace et al. (2008) found that compared to 20% of White students, about 50% of Black students reported being suspended or expelled. This data represents a consistent pattern of Black students' overrepresentation over time with regard to office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan &

Leaf, 2010; Gregory & Roberts, 2017). In addition, research seeking to determine whether differential behavior is a factor in that gap has largely failed to confirm a connection (Skiba et al., 2002; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), pushing for a deeper look into the school and personnel factors that make this gap in discipline outcomes a reality, and hurdle, for Black students.

### ***Black Student Experiences***

Conceptualizing the current experiences of Black students in US schools without including their first-hand accounts of their own realities results in an incomplete narrative. People of color report perceiving bias across many aspects of their K-12 school lives and note that they notice differences in the expectations and academic experiences of various groups within schools and in society (El-Amin et al., 2017). This is supported by research that suggests Black students as a whole are less likely to have access to high-quality, grade-level instruction with 38% percent of classrooms with mostly students of color having no grade level assignments (TNTP, 2018). This is compared to 12% of classrooms with mostly white students having no grade level assignments. Other metrics of student experience also highlight key indicators that provide a richer context when considering the current reality of Black students in the US. Walton and Cohen (2007) found that when Black students are stigmatized in the academic realm, they are impacted by a decrease in their sense of belonging. This trend was not found in White students. In addition, the positive impact of having Black teachers on Black students is documented. Gershenson, Hart, Hyman, Lindsay, and Papageorge (2018) found that Black students randomly assigned Black teachers before the third grade were more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college as



their same-school peers. However, given the underrepresentation of people of color in the education field, it is difficult for students to have access to this advantage (Madkins, 2011). Black teachers represent about 7% of the teaching population as of the 2015-2016 school year, while Black students made up about 14% of school-aged students (de Brey et al., 2019).

Whether by looking through the lens of academic achievement, teacher perception, overrepresentation in SPED, disproportionate rates of disciplinary action, or the actual lived experiences of the population, the current reality for Black students in schools provide a clear understanding of the adverse conditions they face daily. It also raises the question of how to ensure that schools provide interventions that support the ability of Black students to overcome this adverse reality, or in short, their resilience.

### **Resilience of Students**

Black students face sustained adversity due to antiblackness pervasive throughout the country's institutions, including the educational institutions that are responsible for their academic and social development. Therefore, it is vital to consider the factors impacting their resilience capacity in order to better engage in conversation concerning equitable educational experiences. This section first discusses how resilience has been measured in school historically along with the emphasis on developing grit in students as an intervention meant to increase resilience capacity. Sense of mastery, sense of relatedness, and emotional reactivity are then explored as components of resilience capacity and a socio-ecological model of resilience that outlines what impacts that capacity is presented. Finally, an intentional look into the resilience of African Americans in terms of perspectives of success and factors impacting their resilience is

used to inform interventions aimed at increasing the resilience of Black students in schools.

### ***Resilience in Schools***

Resilience is the process by which individuals are able to face and overcome adversity. Measuring resilience of students in schools has historically relied on varied scales and definitions of the term (Prince-Embury, 2011; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortes, 2009). Some research correlates resilience with specific indicators of success such as graduation rates or academic achievement (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Bryan, 2005). These measures highlight the ability of students to overcome certain adverse conditions and meet the traditional criteria for success; however, it can be argued that the focus on educational/academic resilience narrows the perspective insights. To push further into the facilitation of resilience, research that highlights the study of protective factors and their impact on individual resilience is relevant for certain subgroups, who historically face sustained adversity within educational institutions (Miller & MacIntosh, 1999).

At the school level, a focus on developing grit in students has become a major component of addressing student resilience concerns. Grit, a characteristic that encompasses resolve and determination to overcome challenges, is a core aspect of many character education programs often suggested for use to develop resilience in vulnerable student populations (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seigman, 2009; Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013). Critics suggest that a focus on grit as resilience intervention squarely places the burden of improved capacity on the individual student instead of the improvement of broader social inequities (Golden, 2017). Prince-Embury's

(2011) introduces a definition of resilience that provides context as to why this type of intervention is incomplete as she writes that it is “... the complex interaction of child characteristics and external supports that buffer the effects of adverse situations that place children at risk for negative outcomes” (p. 672). The emphasis on grit often occurs at the expense of considering the external supports that schools can offer that also play a vital role in buffering the negative impact of adversity on students.

### ***Components of Resilience Capacity***

Prince-Embury (2011) writes that *resilience capacity* of an individual is determined by three components: (a) sense of mastery; (b) sense of relatedness; (c) emotional reactivity. Sense of mastery is a sense of control over one’s own life and relates to the ability to anticipate and enjoy cause and effect relationships in one’s environment. It can also be considered as the extent to which a person has positive expectations of their capacity for impacting their own mastery. It is driven by innate curiosity and self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s own ability to master. In school environments, a greater sense of mastery positively correlates to success. The second component of resilience capacity, sense of relatedness, is the extent to which an individual has relational experiences that can provide specific support when faced with adversity. These relationships have been found to provide support even when they are not current given that previous support can develop internal mechanisms that shield from adversity. Given that an increased sense of relatedness has been found to result in individuals being less vulnerable to negative outcomes after adversity, providing opportunities for supportive relationships to be built is a key component for intervening and impacting resilience. Impacting emotional reactivity, or “the child’s arousability or

the threshold of tolerance that exists prior to the occurrence of adverse events or circumstances (p. 675)” is another way in which resilience capacity is affected.

Emotional reactivity is a measure of the degree of upheaval that results from adversity and having low reactivity can show itself in multiple ways, such as increased sensitivity and decreased tolerance. Interventions that support an individual's ability to modulate these emotional responses can therefore have a positive impact on resilience capacity.

### ***Impacting Resilience Capacity***

Michael Ungar (2011) describes a social-ecological model of resilience which finds its roots in an ecological theory of human development that suggests a child’s environment is composed of several interconnected systems and that the interactions between those systems are a crucial deciding factor in the child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In shifting the landscape of human development from solely the child to the interactions of the child and their environment, Bronfenbrenner’s work sparked a shift that later occurred in the study of resilience. Defined by Ungar et al. (2013) as ‘a particular subset of processes associated with human development: those that enhance the experience of well-being among individuals who face significant adversity’ (p. 348), the field of resilience focuses in on a specific component of human development; that which is relevant when individuals suffer adversity. Borrowing from Bronfenbrenner (1979), an understanding of interactions between nested systems of differing proximity has provided a bridge to a social-ecological lens through which researchers can consider the factors that impact individual characteristics of resilience. According to Ungar (2011), much of the resilience literature in education include “microsystem interactions, with family, peers, and teachers being the foci of most

studies” (p. 3), followed by the mesosystem interactions which consist of interactions between microsystems that “determine the nature of the developmentally supportive resources available to individuals that influence their capacity to thrive” (p. 3).

Exosystems, which are “the institutional environments in which children's caregivers interact and services and policies are designed and delivered” (p. 3), have been relatively absent in resilience research and when highlighted, is outside the realm of education and instead focused on community and child interactions during natural disasters (Unger, 2011). Historically, much of resilience research has approached resilience through a narrow lens that uses measurements easily contributed to an individual, such as intelligence, attachment, educational performance, as indicators of resiliency (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). Though definitions of resilience are varied, the socio-ecological shift suggests that the spotlight should move from the aforementioned work focused on the individual to work that focuses on the environment and moves toward a potential for more systemic work (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Pianta & Walsh, 1998).

Aligned to this shift, Johnson (2008) uses student view/experience data from a longitudinal study to connect the meaningful impact of teacher-student relationships on student resilience to the more abstract need for transforming school structures to enhance and ensure those relationships are encouraged. Other research also highlights interventions that fall within the responsibility of the institution such as, implementing structures that support strong teacher-student relationships and intentionally planning for responses that positively impact student coping ability like what happens when students make mistakes and encounter difficulties (Sharkey, You & Schnoebelen, 2008; Nicoll,

2014). Brooks (2006) proposes several actions schools can take including increasing opportunities for student participation in the school, developing teacher and staff resilience, and developing social competence. The importance of intentional action is also reflected in the results of Borman and Rachuba's (2001) comparison of several school models for resilience-promotion. The supportive school community model, which was the only one that included elements of actively shielding children from adversity, had the most impact on student resilience. Taking action that actively shields requires an understanding of the adversity students face and in the case of Black students, that adversity includes antiblackness.

### **Antiblackness as Adversity**

Framing the pervasive nature of antiblackness within our society provides a basis for the idea that Black students in K-12 schools operate in environments that present an ever-present adversity. This section defines what is meant by antiblackness and explores that Blackness often exists as antagonistic, threatening, and significant in society. To connect the presence of antiblackness to the everyday reality of Black students, we also discuss the outcomes of antiblackness in the educational realm including the impact of decontextualizing Blackness in the equity conversation.

### ***Defining Antiblackness as Adversity***

In the many definitions of resilience, the overcoming of some adverse condition is central to the concept (Condly, 2006; Ungar, 2012). Antiblackness, or more specifically, the ingrained presence of anti-blackness within our society can be conceptualized as the adversity to which Black students must both respond and do well despite in order to be labeled resilient. In defining antiblackness, it "refers to a broader antagonistic

relationship between blackness and (the possibility of) humanity” (p.429) and is expounded upon in afro-pessimism, a theory which frames Black people as property in the social consciousness and suggests that the right to live, move and breathe for self is contrary to that role (Dumas & Ross, 2016). The concept of antiblackness is differentiated from racism in that it speaks specifically to an inevitable struggle between Blackness and humanity that is permanent and pervasive (Dumas, 2013). Dumas (2016) built upon the idea of the permanent and ingrained nature of antiblackness to suggest that it should and can be used as a tool of analysis when contending with the institutional interactions at play in society, specifically in education policy.

BlackCrit, as presented by Dumas & Ross (2016), is a theory that provides a way to analyze and consider the specificity of Blackness while also providing room for a love of blackness. This is in contrast to critical race theory, which is not specific to blackness and theorizes racism in general. Dumas & Ross (2016) suggest that Black Critical Theory helps explain how Black bodies are “marginalized, disregarded, and disdained” (p. 417) and builds on the fact that antiblackness is endemic. By conceptualizing antiblackness, one is able to both identify and respond to an otherwise ignored or silenced key factor in education policy which Dumas (2016) emphasizes as he advocates for the mere awareness of antiblackness within educational spaces.

Dumas & Ross (2016) also highlight themes of antiblackness that describe the way blackness exists globally. Blackness is antagonistic, threatening, and significant as it exists within an anti-Black society. The news headlines narrate the hostile environment that Black people navigate daily, whether you’re a teenager in the backseat of a car in which rap music plays too loudly or a black man carrying a permitted gun, your

Blackness matters and presents as a threat punishable by death. At the school level, the same phenomenon is present. However, the ability to intervene and support Black students in surviving and excelling despite encountering adverse environments steeped in antiblackness is dependent upon the acceptance of the aforementioned themes as reality. Matias & Liou (2015) highlight the destructive nature of colorblind policies that portray urban schools, and the Black students within them, as deficient and in need of saving. The strength of recognizing antiblackness as adversity is that it instead focuses the need for intervention not on the students, but on the institutional policies and practices that have been influenced through the antiblack lens.

### *Outcomes of Antiblackness*

The idea of awareness of antiblackness stands in direct contrast (and response to) the post-racialism that drives much of the diversity initiative and multicultural nature of education today. Theorized as a de-contextualization of racism, post-racialism separated the concept of racism from societal organization and leaves it within the realm of thinking (Curry, 2015). It is the desire to remove racism from true consideration that supports much of the colorblind ideology that exists within our educational institutions. Matias & Liou (2015) speak on the presumptions that White teachers bring to schools in urban spaces, or specifically those that serve Black populations, such as the need to save an inherently deficient community. However, utilizing a lens informed by awareness of anti-Blackness, it can be further communicated that the desire to save Black children from who they are while championing a colorblind perspective is to suggest that to be worthy and to be saved, one's Blackness must be discarded, or at the least, dismissed as irrelevant (Dumas, 2013).



The evidence; however, shows us that Blackness is extremely relevant. Even when controlling for teacher-rated student behavior level, teacher ethnicity, and level of disruptive behavior in the classroom as a whole, Black students are still significantly more likely to receive office disciplinary referrals than their white peers (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010). Even more telling is the finding that Bradshaw et al. (2010) discussed showing that, in some circumstances, ethnic match between teachers and their students did not reduce the risk for referrals. Black as the problem is a common refrain in education reform and within the realm of education policy, it exists as the reality against which we, of all races, often push. The disproportionately negative outcomes we see for Black students suggest a hostile environment for those students. Dumas (2016) utilizes the significant example of school desegregation as institutional policy that regarded Black as the problem to be solved and resulted in a dramatic dismantling of the Black educational community and the continuation of anti-Black housing, funding, and educational policy that still served to protect others from the Black.

### **Critically Conscious Schools as Resiliency Intervention**

This study proposes that the school can operate as a quality environment for Black students by supporting the mitigation of antiblackness. This section defines critical consciousness as an intervention that assists in the development of said environments. First, critical consciousness is defined and then the transformative potential framework, a tool for measuring the level of critical consciousness, is explored. Lastly, we consider Afrocentric thought as a possible lens for informing critical action meant to support the resilience of Black students.

### *Defining Critical Consciousness*

Paulo Freire (2018), a Brazilian educator, first termed critical consciousness as a way to encourage the ability of the Brazilian working class to recognize, question, and challenge the social realities that result in a social structure that consistently reproduces a lower class populated by the same groups of people. Since then, researchers have utilized the concept to explore its place and potential beneficial nature for groups of marginalized communities. In education, there has been significant interest in the usefulness of critical consciousness as not only a trait in students from marginalized communities that provides a sense and agency and allows for them to critique the inequities of the society in which they live, but also as a necessary component of education that strives to be equitable and ethical (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2016, Kumagai & Lypson, 2009).

Kumagai & Lypson (2009) summarize the critical consciousness concept well as quoted here:

“... critical consciousness posits that the thinking subject does not exist in isolation but, rather, in relationship to others in the world. The development of critical consciousness involves a reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social relationships—an act that Freire calls “reading the world”— and the fostering of a reorientation of perspective towards a commitment to social justice. The development of this type of consciousness—a process that Freire calls “conscientization”—is both cognitive and affective and leads to engaged discourse, collaborative problem-solving, and a “rehumanization” of human relationships.” (pg. 783)

The latter portion of the quote begins to speak to a two-dimensional definition of critical consciousness that incorporates not only the ability of a person to critically analyze structural oppression, but also the collective action that is taken in order to impact the inequitable realities. The dual nature of critical consciousness, a concept which is expounded upon throughout the literature (Diemer et al., 2014 & Windsor et al. 2014), has guided much of its use in education through a lens of the benefits its development could encourage in students historically underserved by the education system. Luter, Mitchell, & Taylor (2017) studied a program guided by critical pedagogy to develop critical consciousness in students and its impact on academic factors. It was found that the program resulted in positive changes in attendance, tardiness, suspension rates, and standardized scores for students scoring in the lowest scoring categories. However, changes in standardized test scores were not reflected in class grades and Luter, Mitchell & Taylor (2017) suspected this being due to teacher bias. This finding is reflective of the fact that the barriers to equitable educational experiences reach beyond what we can manipulate in solely the student. Gay and Kirkland (2003) refer to this idea by highlighting the need for developing critically conscious teachers during pre-service, while Ladson-Billings (1995) discussed the impossible task of developing critically conscious students with teachers who are also critically conscious. This pattern is consistent throughout the literature as the discussion circles around what schools can do to develop the critical consciousness of their students, and sometime teachers. However, even when these interventions operate as planned, as in with a student referred to by El-Amin et al. (2017), a key puzzle piece tends to be missing. Terrance, a student at One

Vision said the following in response to his participation in a project meant to encourage the development of critical consciousness:

“I wanted opportunities to speak openly with my peers about the things that we see every day. Crime rates, drug rates, riots. I had the chance to put the past in conversation with the future. I watched a documentary that showed how police brutality

and issues like that have been going on for a long time . . . [and that black] children back

in the day didn’t have the opportunity to come to a school like One Vision. I consider that

a challenge. Sometimes I want to leave One Vision. Sometimes I want to leave so bad. But I know deep down in my heart why I’m here, so I buckle down and do my homework . . . I see the bigger picture.” (pg. 18)

Though you see aspects of the reflective and action-oriented nature of Freire's (2018) critical consciousness in Terrance’s description of his experience, a gaping hole exist in the discussion. Why does he want to leave One Vision so badly? What is happening at the institutional level at the same time that they focus on developing Terrance’s ability to recognize and address the inequity around him? Jemal (2017) notes in their review of the critical consciousness literature that the definitions of currently in use “exclude oppressors and may inadvertently support the proposition that oppression is a problem for the oppressed to solve” (pg. 15). In systems of inequity, it is vital for the oppressor to also engage in critical consciousness in order to leverage their intrinsic power.

### ***Transformative Potential Framework***

In order to frame critical consciousness as a feasible intervention for mitigating the impact of antiblackness on the educational experiences of Black students, it must be understood that, in action, it has the potential to transform. Jemal (2017) writes about the idea of transformative potential, which is a framework written in response to some limitations of critically conscious pedagogy. This framework includes two dimensions that must be mastered in order to maximize transformative potential. First, transformative consciousness, or the ability to critically reflect on conditions that shape life, can exist on three progressively critical levels: (1) denial, (2) blame, and (3) critical. The second dimension, transformative action, refers to actively working to change conditions. This dimension also consists of three levels: (1) destructive, (2) avoidant, and (3) critical. This framework does build off the idea of Freire (2000) that action without reflection cannot impact the core cause of a problem and reflection without action does not result in any significant change. It is with these two dimensions that educational institutions can be evaluated on their level of both consciousness and action to determine if their ranking has any transformative impact on the resilience capacity of Black students it serves.

### ***Afrocentric Thought as a Lens for Conscious Action***

The transformative potential of an institution should rely on its ability to critically reflect and take action. As stated before, framing antiblackness as adversity provides a lens for reflection that is specific to the challenges faced by Black students in this country's K-12 educational institutions. It is also important that critical action be framed through a lens that is specific to the unique needs of the target population. Therefore, this

study explores the viability of using Afrocentric thought to inform a school culture that increases Black students' resilience capacity. Predominantly Euromerican colleges and universities were founded with the intent of educating the White middle class and rely on a body of knowledge that support Eurocentric values and norms. However, by highlighting Afrocentric thought, I seek to connect to the need for racial identity and examine its impact on the resiliency of Black students. Schiele (as cited by Stewart, 2004) discusses three assumptions, or tenets, of Afrocentric thought that can guide an exploration of the impact of specific culture on Black student resilience: (a) "Human identity is a collective identity"; (b) "The spiritual or nonmaterial aspects of human life are as important as the material components"; (c) "The affective approach to knowledge is as valid as other forms of knowledge" (p. 222). The first, also referred to as *survival of the tribe*, suggests that individuals have a responsibility to maintain the integrity of the community while the community's purpose is the growth and uplifting of the individual (Johnson, 2001). Next, *spiritual conscientiousness* is the sense of divine power other than self at work and impacting existence. The last, which is also known as *harmony with nature*, stresses the uniqueness and right-to-be of every group and species and places value on alternate forms of understanding. These tenets are reflected well for action in the Nguzo Saba, which provide a framework that addresses possible developmental needs of Black students (Johnson, 2001). By implementing cultural and instructional practices that highlight (a) Umoja (unity), (b) Kujichagulia (self-determination), (c) Ujima (cooperative economics), (d) Nia (purpose), (e) Kuumba (creativity), and (f) Imani (faith), I predict that institutions can rise to the level of critical in transformative action by

providing the quality environments Black students need specifically to increase resilience capacity in the face of antiblackness as adversity.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to propose a *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* that illustrates the impact of critically conscious educational institutions on the resilience of Black students. Specifically, the framework will inform how educational institutions can intervene and impact the experiences and outcomes of Black students who are operating within anti-Black systems. By focusing the attention on the behaviors of the institution, this study centers a social ecological model of resilience. This model supports a shift from emphasizing resilience as simply an individual trait determining vulnerability to considering it as a spectrum that is influenced by the characteristics of their surrounding environments. Therefore, in order to determine what characteristics of educational institutions best mitigate the impact of antiblackness on Black students, this study seeks to answer three questions: (a) What are Black graduates of K-12 schools' perspective of school-related factors impacting their personal resilience capacity?; (b) What school experiences of Black graduates of K-12 schools most impact their level of success?; (c) What are the characteristics of school environments that Black graduates of K-12 schools perceive as nurturing and positively impacting their resilience?

The study employs a qualitative approach informed by a phenomenological method of interviews with Black individuals about their K-12 education experiences. According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), a phenomenological study of this sort is the “study of personal experience and requires a description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation” (p. 103). Edmund Husserl is

widely regarded as the father of phenomenology within modern research and he believed in treating reality as pure phenomena based on how people perceive the world around them (Groenewald, 2004). He suggested that objects exist independently and the experiences that individuals have with these objects are reliable meaning that individuals' perceptions accurately represent their consciousness (Fouche, 1993). This study of lived experiences was further investigated by a student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger and others including, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each highlighting the goal of phenomenological research, which is to accurately describe phenomenon without prejudice (Groenewald, 2004). There are various approaches to phenomenology though all center lived experiences as a method of understanding the world around us (Lavery, 2003). Transcendental phenomenology centers around meaning and is a design that seeks to explain the human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). This is the method chosen for this study because the goal is to derive meaning from the lived experiences of a specific group, Black students, and to use that understanding to inform institutional change for the benefit of the group.

In this chapter, we will discuss the study design including descriptions of the general demographics of the target population and a discussion of the sample used in the study. The setting of the study, the critically conscious school, will also be explained and a discussion of how data will be collected and analyzed will be included. Finally, the chapter will highlight ethical considerations before concluding with a summary.

### **Population and Sample**

The population for this study is Black students currently enrolled in post-secondary institutions who attended K-12 schools in the United States. In public 4-year



institutions, Black students make up 12% of student enrollment, while they make up 14% of the student population in 2-year degree granting institutions. According to the Center on Education and the Workforce (2016), within those institutions the most common majors in which Black students earn degrees are law and public policy (15%), psychology and social work (12%) and health (10%).

A purposeful sampling methodology will be used to select the sample for the study from this population in order to ensure that participants selected have lived experiences of the target phenomenon. By selecting a purposeful sampling methodology, the researcher is able to ensure each participant has the desired characteristics necessary for successful study of the focus research questions. In the case of this study, I will use criterion based sampling to study 10 people that meet the following inclusionary criteria: (a) current college student that studies at a 2 or 4 year university and is enrolled in a degree seeking program, (b) identifies as Black at birth, and (c) willing to participate in the study. Participants excluded from the study are excluded because they: (a) are not college students, (b) do not identify as Black at birth, and/or (c) are not willing to participate in the study. Table 1 provides demographic information for each chosen participant.

Table 1  
*Participants*

Name	Education Status	Type of High School	Age
1 Jada	Senior	Suburban Trad. Public	22
2 Vernon	Sophomore	Urban Trad. Public	20
3 Thelma	Junior	Suburban Trad. Public	21
4 Cornelius	Senior	Urban Public Charter	22
5 Tommy	Junior	Urban Trad. Public	20
6 Saydrianna	Senior	Urban Public Charter	22
7 Celice	Freshman	Urban Public Charter	19
8 Chazmine	Senior	Suburban Private	22

Table 1 (continued)  
*Participants*

Name	Education Status	Type of High School	Age
9 Erin	Junior	Urban Trad. Public	21
10 Jordan	Sophomore	Urban Trad. Public	20

*Note.* Description of study participants

## Setting

As the study will ask that participants, each of whom identify as Black, reflect on their K-12 experiences, the setting of the study is the K-12 public school system within the United States. The discrepancy of experience by race/ethnicity within K-12 schools starts with the societal inequity Black students' families face. Thirty-two percent of Black children under the age of 18 come from families living in poverty, as compared to 11% of White children and 26% of Hispanic children (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2017). Once Black students are in school, their outcomes at each school level fall behind the national average and academic performance is glaringly lower than their White counterparts. In reading, average scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were 206, 249, and 266 for 4th and 8th grade Black students in 2017 and 12th grade Black students in 2015, respectively. Comparatively in the same years, reading scores for 4th, 8th, and 12th grade White students were 232, 275, and 295, respectively. The same pattern is evident in both math and science scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Other outcomes also highlight discrepancies in experience in K-12 settings for Black students. In the United States, the adjusted cohort graduation rate for Black students in public high schools falls behind that of White students in every state in the country, along with the District of Columbia. Minnesota and Wisconsin have the largest gaps, 23% and 26% respectively, and are the most extreme representation of an

unfortunate reality in the K-12 setting. In a facsimile of the social inequities of the country that U.S. schools exist within, opportunities for success in this setting are not equitably distributed and race is an indicator that currently predicts comparative group success.

### **Data Collection**

In the study, the method of data collection will be face-to-face interviews with all participants to retrieve information. All participants involved in the study will be informed of how data will be collected, how it will be processed and used, and the expected audience of the study. Interviews will then take place using open ended questions that seek to allow participants to share their lived experiences fully to support the collection of as much information as possible. This data will be collected using audio recordings, which will then be professionally transcribed in order to prepare data for analysis. As the data is collected, this study seeks to explore the factors and characteristics that participants highlight concerning the experiences in K-12 that most contributed to their academic and personal success.

### ***Instrumentation***

The data collection tool was constructed by creating questions that were aligned to the study's research questions, themes, and theoretical framework. Each question was crafted to either consider participants' perspectives of school related factors that impacted personal resilience and/or success or to harvest the characteristics of school environments participants perceive as nurturing and positively impacting resilience. In addition, the components of the theoretical framework, (a) resilience capacity; (b) critical consciousness; (c) Afrocentric thought; (d) antiblackness, were used to code each

question which provides a structure for thematic data analysis that can then be used to support a framework for critically conscious schools.

### **Data Analysis**

The data for this paper will be collected through interviews with Black college students about their K-12 education experiences and analyzed using a descriptive phenomenological method. According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), a phenomenological study of this sort is the “study of personal experience and requires a description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation” (p. 103). This method of study was chosen because the goal is to understand the lived experiences of a specific group, Black students, and to use that understanding to inform institutional change for the benefit of the group. Ten students will be selected using purposive sampling, which means that the students will be chosen based on their alignment with a specific set of criteria chosen by the researcher (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The responses from a series of profound interviews will then be analyzed using a phenomenological analysis protocol described by Creswell (2013). The analysis will include (a) a description of researchers’ personal experience with resilience as a Black student to clarify personal perspectives; (b) a “horizontalization” of data where topics expressed by the sample are identified; (c) grouping of topics into units of meaning; (d) completion of textual descriptions along with quotations that support the descriptions; (e) construction of the structural description; (f) identification of common elements among the participants. In order to ensure validity of analysis, Dr. Derrick Robinson served as a peer debriefing partner during the coding process. Finally, these common elements will be compared to relevant literature outlined previously to assess its

appropriateness as a framework to inform school cultures that support the resilience of Black students.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher will complete and submit an IRB in line with university research regulations and follow the approved protocol for recruiting participants and collecting data. There are no perceived risks associated with participation in this study and all participants will be made aware of the study's purpose and informed on how the information they share may be used. Participant privacy will be a priority of the study. Participants will only interact with the principal investigator and all responses will be gathered face-to-face or via video conferencing. Participants will also be assigned alternative names in order to ensure that responses are not able to be linked back to the individual.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter three provided an overview of the study's purpose and design and described the study's population in detail. The method of selection and characteristics of the sample were also outlined in order to share a clear picture of the participants who will lend their experiences to the study. The K-12 school landscape in the United States for Black students was also described as the setting for which participants will share their lived experiences. Lastly, details were shared about how data would be collected using face-to face interviews with an interview protocol and analyzed utilizing the phenomenological reduction method to identify common elements within the data. Chapter 4 will detail the findings of this study and seek to share the results of implementing the aforementioned methodology.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study is to inform practices to develop more critically conscious educational institutions in order to positively impact the resilience of Black students. Through the use of semi-structured interviews from 10 participants, the study surfaced practices of teachers, leaders, and systems that specifically supported Black student resilience in an antiblack society. These interviews of college students were enlightening and allowed for the lived experiences of Black students to inform several themes that highlight what K-12 institutions can do to maximize the resilience of the Black students they serve. This chapter presents the findings from the study and also begins the discussion of each theme that was lifted from the responses of the participant group as a whole.

### Surfaced Themes

This section will outline themes that emerged from the interviews conducted which utilized questions that were coded to inform various aspects of the aforementioned *Critically Conscious Institutions Framework*. By trusting the voices of Black students to determine these themes, the study is providing first hand accounts of what should shape institutional change for the benefit of this group. The selection of a phenomenological research design emphasizes the participant voice and utilizes open ended questions to encourage the sharing of personal experiences. In the following analysis of findings, direct quotations from the interview transcripts are highlighted to provide a basis for the description of identified themes. We will then compare the themes to the components of the *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* in order to verify its validity in light of the lived experiences of Black students.

## Impacting Black Student Resilience

Each question used in the study’s interview protocol was coded to determine which research question and component of the theoretical framework it addresses. An analysis of participant responses resulted in the emergence of the following themes when considering characteristics of institutions that support Black student resilience:

Theme 1: Center Blackness

Theme 2: Actively care

Theme 3: Provide freedom to define success

Theme 4: Promote a collectivist culture

These themes were selected due to the frequency with which they emerged across the interviews conducted and their potential to contribute to the knowledge around practices that support the development of critically conscious institutions. Table 1 is a pictorial representation of the themes in relation to the research questions of the study they address.

Table 2  
*Surfaced Themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>
1 Center Blackness	Question 1
2 Actively Care	Question 3
3 Provide freedom to define success	Question 2
4 Promote a collectivist culture	Question 1 & 3

Note. Connecting Emerging Themes to Study’s Research Questions

### ***Center Blackness***

The first theme that emerged from the interviews relate to how the intentional centering of Blackness within schools often supported the resilience and subsequent success of the study sample. This theme can be broken down into two sections:

*Blackness as adversity* and the *intentional celebration of Blackness*.

**Blackness as adversity.** Eight of the participants spoke of challenging experiences in their schools that were due to their identity as a Black student. Affirming the idea of *Blackness as adversity*, they describe various accounts of being acutely aware of a need to overcome. For Jada, it was the stereotype that followed Blackness in a school where she was one of only a few Black students. As she stated:

I didn't really have a lot of examples of what being a black girl in a K through 12 setting was like because it seemed like growing up, the black girls were always like almost othered and like they were defiant, they were belligerent or whatever. But that's how the classroom or educational culture made them seem. Then I was almost like a... I was a black girl, but I also did... I was in certain spaces with white and Asian people and so it was almost like I was separated from them but I understood that I wasn't separated with them as well.

This separation Jada experienced from what it meant to be a Black girl in her school was predicated on her proximity to whiteness. By being in certain spaces due to coursework in the school, she was afforded the benefit of the doubt by her peers. However, it is enlightening that she was well aware of the *othering* of the Black students who were not in those spaces. It was also clear that this experience hindered her ability to engage in a way that supported learning. She speaks of feeling uncomfortable with asking questions due to the more submissive nature of her classmates and the feeling that her interrogative nature was frowned upon by classmates. It wasn't until leaving for college, in spaces that encouraged the questions, that she recognized that inquiry supports her learning.

This *phenomenon of 'othering'* and adversity due to Blackness was also highlighted by Chazmine, though through the lens of viewing her classmates. Though



she reported feeling shielded from certain challenges due to attending a private, independent school her whole life, she did recognize challenges that Black students coming into the school in later years had:

I think that there's a challenge that I think in hindsight was just differing opinions, but I think that from our school of how small our class was, there was only one, no two African American girls in our class all 15 years.... later on we had a larger percentage, eight or so, but I think that it was hard due to the fact that if you've already been here, you're a child, regardless of color that doesn't matter. You have your friends and you've established those relationships years on. So I think that it's more of social animosity between African American girls that joined our class after due to the fact that they felt as if they were outsiders. They felt they needed to become a group.

When Vernon was asked to reflect on challenges specific to his identity as a Black student, he remembers being underestimated and labeled:

But one of the things that was hard was trying to show them I really don't need your hand held. I got this. And even at one point trying to diagnose me with ADHD, excuse my French, it was the simple fact of I just couldn't sit my ass down. You want to diagnose me, but I genuinely just, you bore me. I got the work done, you're boring me... I think it was adjusting to the fact that you're going to lower your standards for me, because I'm a black male from Southeast.

These accounts begin to illuminate the idea that *blackness is significant* (Dumas & Ross, 2016) which underscores its presence as adversity in our antiblack society. It is this significance that underscores Jada's awareness of the 'othering' of Black students in her

school and Chazmine's ability to recognize the *social animosity* of Black girls joining her class later in her school career. It is also this significance that Tommy believes predicated schools' need to control to ensure the "Blackness doesn't take over". He expounds by suggesting that school serving majority white students don't feel the need to enact policies that seek to control every component of the student:

A specific rule that was really jail like to me is walking the second square. I hate that rule to this day. I purposely, when I was in middle school would break the rule. It's like walk in the second square. Tuck your shirt in. I'm like what? We're going from across the hall to right here. We can't walk all over? The mentality of I got control over you right now so I can prepare you for the real world. And man, those norms and rules, it was really like, wow, this is what we're doing? Until I understood that prison to pipeline, I'm like, ah, I got it. I got it.

Celice introduced yet another challenge to overcome as she discussed whether her ability to succeed in K-12 environments was at all negatively impacted due to her being a Black student:

I don't recall specific instances of different opportunities, but I think that the underlying stereotypical or social ideas from the administration or teachers could still possibly do that... impact the success of Black students. They didn't expect the same low level of success for others, for different types of students. And I think they even though they were ensuring that they had done their job, done their side of things, that later on down the line, they wouldn't expect to see all people in the same positions and that expectation was something we noticed.

It is clear from these accounts that challenges directly attributed to students identify as Black are the rule, not the exception. Blackness as adversity is the reality for students. Any action taken by institutions hoping to inform their critical consciousness must frame reflection in that fact.

**Intentional celebration of Blackness.** Centering blackness in an intentional manner can provide the opportunity to both surface these experiences on a larger scale and provide an opportunity to balance the impact of antiblackness by incorporating practices that uplift and affirm students' Black identity. Saydrianna provides a snapshot of an institution that centered blackness in its systems and practices. Perhaps most telling is that when asked about challenges in her school career related to being a Black student, it was this institution's practices that she cited as a reason for those challenges being minimal:

Not particularly because, my parents are really pro-black and so they made sure that I went to school, like kindergarten through sixth grade, I went to an Afrocentric school on the Southside and so we celebrated. My principal was from Ghana. He moved here and was like, I want to open a school and celebrate the traditions. So we celebrated Kwanzaa, Black history month, we had an assembly every morning, we sung the Black National Anthem, we had the rites of passage. So that wasn't really a problem for me.

Asked to expound on how that experience buffered and prepared her to overcome later challenges as a Black student, she shared:

Just having a sense of pride and really learning that being black is beautiful. It's amazing. And really being told that every day at such a young age really instilled

it in me for the rest of my life. I really didn't know how significant it was at the time because I was so young... So then I went to an after school program with other students and the light skin versus dark skin conversation would always come up... Like kids would be like, I'm not black. I'm Brown, I'm light. Like, I'm this. And really not trying to claim their Blackness. And I think at such a young age, I was so like, no, I'm black. I'm beautiful, I'm this. And so it just really helped me and it helped my views and how I look at Blackness.

This description of an *intentional celebration of Blackness* was a theme across several participants. Celice spoke of her experiences in elementary school being a part of a Black history academic bowl team that provided her with the opportunity to learn much of the history she still treasures today. It was the importance placed on the team by the school that she remembers:

We had pep rallies and everything. I really felt like this team was important and something that I should prioritize. I remember having study groups at home and school and people would actually audition to try to make the team. It really made Black history something that was important to me.

With every mention of intentional celebration of Blackness in the experiences of the study participants, there is a sense that these practices provided a foundation that buffered students against inevitable adversity. Celice and Saydrianna both mentioned that it was the value of Blackness in these early environments that could contribute to an internal strength and strong sense of self that counters against the persistent reality of the antiblack society in which they live. For Jada the same idea was true, but she recognized that she was not getting that intervention from the schoolhouse:

I didn't think that my teachers could fully understand my culture and my blackness and just being a black woman, being a black girl growing up and all those things, self-esteem. I had that at home due to coming from an African culture and community and that gave me some protection I think against some of the perceptions that came from the school.

Tommy also highlighted the same idea:

It's like with Black Lives Matter and the constant need to protect yourself in this country as a black person. If I didn't have the background I have, my family and school. Especially my black teachers who really went out of their way to say Black is special and Black is magic, I know I would have a much harder time dealing with being a Black man in America.

**Summary of theme 1.** The reality is that in our society, Blackness is always relevant. Historically, those who identify as Black have lived under sustained adversity and our educational institutions are not an exception to that rule. The experiences of the study's sample highlight a purposeful centering of Blackness as a protective factor that positively impacts individual resilience (Miller & MacIntosh, 1999). It's important to note that this centering is varied, but it revolves around the recognition and acceptance that Blackness is significant. Therefore, the celebration of Blackness along with the knowledge of how it exists in an antiblack society provides a balance that supports overcoming this specific adversity for Black students.

### *Actively care*

The second theme emerging from the interview transcripts can be described as care in action. Within this theme, there was evidence of two subthemes that were

consistent across the responses of the study's participants. The first, *intentional practices of individual educators*, highlights the importance of the individual within educational institutions while the second, *culturally responsive pedagogy*, is a recognition of types of teaching practice that support care in action for Black students.

**Intentional practices of individual educators.** When responding to questions concerning specific experiences that helped overcome challenges and that stood out as some of the best of their K-12 career, participants often discussed individual educators that demonstrated their care for students through their actions. Tommy shared "it mattered which class you were going to" when considering the support he had in overcoming challenges because when it came to his high school, he could split the educators he came into contact with into at least two groups:

There were those who just didn't want us there and you could tell. I remember teachers making comments about being excited when certain people were suspended... you know well at least we'll get through the lesson today... stuff like that. So they were probably saying the same thing when you weren't there too or those were your friends so it just made it like them versus us. Then you had teachers who would be mad and would actually fight for you not to get suspended. They wanted you there. I remember Ms. [--] would tell people to just send me to her class instead of writing me up. She said there was nothing at the house except time and trouble. So when I think about overcoming challenges... I got strength from her looking out for me and I also wanted to do better so she wouldn't be disappointed.

Tommy was reflective of all the study's participants; each was cognizant

of practices by individual educators that both demonstrated care and also had a noticeable impact on their potential for success. Jordan discussed several practices he recognized as crucial in middle and high school:

But at the middle school level in particular, it was like the unique ways of finding ways to get math across because honestly, when I entered KIPP I didn't know how to read, couldn't even multiply.... Like, whoa, with this support I can do anything. Then I got to the high school level and the support just amplified, through the college counseling team, you're not there alone. So the support that they provided allowed me to be successful and I've never seen that support ... until this day I don't have to calculate my financial aid bill because I have an advisor through KIPP that does that. It's just those types of support systems that kind of allowed me to be successful in the way that I am.

Thelma also recounted intentional practices of individual educators and described her experience with her school counselor as “invaluable”. The actual actions she described were big and small, from expressing an interest in her family life outside of school to always having a smile on her face when she saw Thelma. In reference to those actions, Thelma discusses how that impacted her ability to overcome challenges stating that “I needed somebody at school who I knew was in my corner and I knew I could count on... it gave me somewhere to go when things got hard.” In discussing her struggles in school, the highlighting of this single individual and her ability to motivate and support success is key in understanding the seemingly small things that could support resilience. Erin’s reflection was around an art teacher, Mr. [--]:

People look at him as just the art teacher. But one of the things that I always tell people is he has a unique way of helping kids graduate. And the reason why he's able to last so long is because he takes the classroom, and he cares about the social emotional learning of a kid. He cares about, hey, what happened on the way to school? Why are you not doing your work. What made you put your head down? Is there something going on at home? He takes it the extra mile. That extra mile for me, for example, specifically the bus was a two bus stop ride from my house. He'd come on my route every day and pick me up. That little two minute drive. I'm like, yo, I feel special. For a teacher just to stop and pick me up, that goes a long way because now I look forward to going out to school every day because now I'm getting a ride.

Cornelius also discussed social emotional learning stating “it's looking at the student as a whole, and that social emotional learning, and those practices, I know they use that terminology in their training a lot, but it's about putting it into practice.” He also expounded on an individual educator, his former principal, and a practice she engaged in that impacted him greatly:

No matter what she had to do that day, she made sure every morning she was in the stairwell greeting the students. Now most people look at that like, oh she's just doing what a principal is supposed to do, but that, to be in the stairwell every morning basically feeling out your students, and she knows when a girl is upset. So she'll be like, what's going on with you? What boyfriend? That type of environment where it's like, I know, I know you're upset. I know, so I'm going to find some ways to connect with you before you even get to that classroom. Just



that ability to be there in that presence and have her greet us every morning, that's a special thing.

One of the ideas that stands out in this experience is that he was very aware that his principal was *feeling* the students out and reacting to their emotional state each morning. Saydrianna also pointed out practices that showed educators caring about the emotional state of students as a key factor in providing an environment conducive to success. She reflects:

It was the teachers who would ask you how you were doing and then really listen. Some of my classmates were dealing with a lot of stuff you know especially at home or in the neighborhood and they would just have bad days sometimes. And I remember one teacher who used to go out into the hallway to talk to you one on one and then she might just let you chill out by yourself that day or put your head down for the class period if you needed it. And people really appreciated that... you could tell because she wouldn't have the same behavior problems as some of the other teachers would... Sometimes you just couldn't focus on school and the teachers that tried to figure out the deeper issues, they are the ones that were the best. I still remember them and when I think of school, it would probably not have been possible if they weren't there.

When asked what about school wouldn't have been possible, she continued "just getting through it. You don't want to go to a place that feels like nobody cares about you. So really those teachers were the reason a lot of kids kept coming, especially in high school." Supporting the importance of these actions, Jones and Bouffard (2012) discuss the need for educators to consider the social emotional learning needs of students in order

to create an environment that is conducive to learning for all students, particularly those who encounter adversity. Vernon's discussion of adversity as a black student in an environment that valued structure and rules over the social emotional needs of students is enlightening:

It almost felt like they felt like if there weren't all these rules, we would be out of control. Looking back it's like this is what these black kids need to be successful. But it was all about taking what made us unique out of us... So that gets to you because it feels like it doesn't matter to anybody who you are. All rules don't work for everybody, but there it was basically our way or you can leave, which didn't make you feel like you could bring your real self to the building, you know? I felt like you were valued if you could conform but if you couldn't you were out so y'all really don't care about us then. Not who we are because if so, you would work harder to understand us even when we didn't conform.

Vernon's description of the devaluing of what made the students who they were and his direct connection of the desire of the school for them to conform to the desire to remove behaviors that he perceived as markers of their *blackness* is a key example of the adversity Black students face unique to their place in this world as Black people. This could explain why the majority of the stories told that connected to active care by individual educators were told through the lens of individuals who valued the whole person, including the social and emotional needs not traditionally serviced in a school environment. It was also interesting to note that in each of these examples, participants did not describe an entire educational institution as a place that actively cared about the humanity of the students. They all pointed out individual educators within the institution

that provided safe spaces from the norm within the institution. As Cornelius ended his interview:

When I came to school, I needed more love. All of the people that I'm spending eight hours a day, 180 days out the school year out of 365 with, I don't need you to tell me I'm a failure if you don't do such and such. Well, if I didn't do it, can you at least figure out why I didn't do it? And so just that ... it was a need. I just needed more love within that system of K through 12.

**Culturally responsive pedagogy.** Another interesting note when considering the descriptions participants gave of those who intentionally created these supportive environments was the racial identity of the individuals. Eight out of ten participants shared that the people they viewed as caring and most integral in their ability to overcome challenges were Black teachers. Jordan described these Black teachers' classrooms as "places you go when you just need to talk and need somebody to help you through a bad day." He described those classrooms as places that were vital to his desire and ability to successfully finish middle and high school:

A lot of my classmates dropped out or were just absent so much that it was impossible to walk across the stage. And honestly there were times when I could have taken that path, but there are certain teachers I can remember who were the reason that didn't happen. Mr. [--] when I was in middle school was one. All I can remember is thinking he was cool and he cared about what we cared about. He would talk to us about current events, music and stuff we liked, and then we also were learning. But it felt like those things weren't mutually exclusive. We could be ourselves and we could also learn and it could all be a part of the same

experience. If it wasn't for teachers like Mr. [--], I don't think I would have seen how education fit in my own life the way I did. That's why college became an option for me and something that I wanted to try to do.

Tommy also discusses feeling as though he did have several excellent teachers, both white and Black, but also stated it was "just a different feeling in Black teachers' rooms... well some of them. It felt like they really care about, you know, who you really are. Like outside of being a student." This begs the questions of what about these specific Black teachers caused this different feeling. Tommy expounds by noting:

It's not that I didn't have good teachers who were not Black. And not all my Black teachers were good because there were some who were... they were not the best at all. But the ones who I really remember being the most important to me and my group were the ones who we felt the most comfortable with and the ones that we knew could really understand us. My Black teachers just had a way of establishing this relationship with me that was... it's hard to describe, but I think I kind of just trusted them more. And I felt like what they were teaching was important to me because they would know. They knew what it was like in the outside world for us black kids and they could make connections to things that a white teacher might not even notice.

Both Jordan and Tommy discussed a component of culturally relevant pedagogy that is discussed as crucial, cultural competence, or developing positive ethnic and cultural identities while succeeding academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It would be irresponsible to assume that only Black teachers can do this for Black students, but it is important to highlight the lived experiences of Black students to inform our

understanding of when this is most likely to occur for that population. Jada, who was one of the two participants who didn't attribute the active care of individual educators to a Black teacher or administrator still highlighted the importance of teachers of color to the diverse students within a school:

So something really interesting about my high school was it was recognized as the Most diverse high school in the nation. So there's like probably 80 languages spoken in high school. So it felt like almost like an airport, like you were going through Hartsfield Airport. So there were teachers that were able to really be like a safe haven for the students and they were particularly Latino teachers and there weren't... So I was the editor of my school paper and I remember I put out an article about how there was only one high school teacher that was black and he was the gym teacher. So in our culturally diverse school and the other like... So the diversity was really found amongst the cohort of Latino people. So they were... and they were all in the civics/history department.

In describing one of these civics teachers, Jada even described that this is where she was introduced to *culturally responsive pedagogy*. In describing some of the practices of the teacher, such as using the music the students connected to as source material in the course and ensuring they engaged with the politics and council meetings of their own community, Jada ends by noting that she believes the teacher did those things because she “actually cared about whether or not we were learning”. This is an important understanding to surface because another key component of culturally responsive pedagogy is that of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The opposite was true in

classrooms where teachers did not act in a way that could be described as actively caring.

Jada also described this type of classroom and how it impacted her ability to succeed:

I remember asking him for help one day after school, he was really intimidating to meet and he was just like, "Did you ask your classmates? Did you Google it?" I just didn't understand why he wasn't trying to help me as my teacher. So I think that was a very defining moment for me. I didn't get the best grade in the class and it really impacted the way that I moved regarding STEM.

Jada attributed her ability to actually succeed in this classroom not to her own ability or knack for the subject but to her perception of the teacher's desire to support her in the learning. This was a consistent idea across several participants as they the cause and effect relationship between educator actions and their ability to persevere and succeed despite challenges. She also expounded on another experience from earlier in her schooling that highlighted a lack of this cultural competence:

That was a really interesting experience in a school where I was having to assimilate and then also coming home and being rooted in my culture. I remember taking, in third grade I took an English, an ELL class and it just seemed, I just remember it seeming very demeaning in some ways. Like I was leaving the classroom to go to... I was leaving the classroom with all my friends during an activity that was really interesting, and then I was sent to a room that was just really pale, really blank and then I was just sitting with one person and we were just going through things and it was just... I just remember as a kid feeling like I was not understood. So that was an experience that I had.

Erin also described an incident of low expectations that directly impacted his own motivation and perseverance:

I think the first impact was I started at a public school in [city], traditional public school. It was little things of like, we have this standardized test. At the time I just thought it was a test I'm turning in trying to meet the state standards. But there was one year where the teacher took the test, erased my answers, and did the correct answer. And so it was little things like that where I was like, I know that's not right, but me as a student, I can't just come up to a teacher because of that. It was like a superiority thing. I know that personally hindered my success, but it also was kind of, it was good that that happened because the school eventually got shut down and it forced my parent, specifically my grandma to figure out what's the best school system to put you in?

Thelma added to this understanding of the importance of expectations of academic

success without sacrificing cultural well-being as she discussed “honestly hating math” until coming across a teacher who she described as caring whether she learned the content or not:

She would tell me to stop saying that I wasn't good at math. She was this Black lady and she was so excited about math... in a funny way really. Because I had never seen that. And she would always say that math is for everybody and everybody needs it. She wouldn't let us give up and by the end of that class I specifically remember not thinking that hard meant I couldn't do something. It was just a process that you had to get through to learn it. That has actually stuck

with me because I don't say what I'm not good at anymore even now. I'm just grateful that she cared enough to make sure we got it because it was teachers who just taught and then if you didn't understand it was your fault.

In addition, Celice also discussed the need for teachers for whom failure was not an option while also affirming students and actively caring:

If there is one thing that I think needs to be done more frequently for Black students in this country, it's that they need people to equate success with Black kids on a larger scale. What I mean is that there are all these images we see as Black people and so many of them are negative. Then you get to school and it feels like we're getting a certain type of education. It's not the same type of schooling that other people are getting. It feels like the expectations are just low sometimes... When I got to college I was not ready. And that makes me feel like my schools didn't care about me enough to make sure I was ready. It's like they felt like there was only so much we could do.

The idea of academic success and the beliefs of the teachers and the school in the abilities of students was a pattern throughout the transcripts. Jordan highlighted both the importance of academic success and cultural competence in his reflection of instances where he felt standards were lowered due to the populations socioeconomic and racial background:

Because I know you're low income because I know you come from this type of background, it was almost like you're not going anywhere anyway, so I'm going to just keep the standard here and I'm sure you can meet that standard. If not I'm going to just keep lowering the standard. So just that lowering the standard thing



was huge, but it also created this I can't connect with you, so because I can't connect with my teacher, there's nothing there. So that connection point, because I had mostly white women teachers, it just never clicked as a black male.

Chazmine, who did not identify a Black teacher or educator as one who was most integral to her ability to overcome challenges, did not personally connect any specific challenges with her Blackness; however, in describing the plight of the Black students who joined the school's population later in her K-12 career, she noted that they seemed to need to form a group that she attributed to social animosity. When asked to share more on that phenomenon, she discussed the following:

Well it wasn't something I saw because I'd been there and been with the same girls since I was 3. But for them, coming into a new place where you don't see a lot of Black faces, if that's what you're used to, I think you can become sensitive to a lot. So they felt that the school wasn't reflective of them and you know that culture and that started the need to group up to feel some level of comfort and I just never needed that because I had my friends and I felt comfortable there.

It is telling to note that even in Chazmine's experience that did not include sharing of any specific personal adversity due to Blackness, she was able to recognize that challenge in other students. Furthermore, the idea that a school environment that fails to reflect the personal cultures of Black students is an obstacle to success is clearly present and highlights the potential impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on Black student success.

**Summary of theme 2.** Education is an occupation that often assumes care as a given. However, the experiences of the participants highlight that students' perceptions

of care are often attached to the actions of individuals who are seen as an exception to the norm. This active care came in the form of checking in on mental and emotional state regularly, recognizing student humanity beyond the traditional classroom relationship, and showcasing investment in the community the student lives in. A crucial trend is that active care was not described at the institutional level at all in these participant experiences. Individuals were the sole executors of this theme which provides definite room for improvement when considering institutional practice.

In addition to the intentional practices of individual educators, there was also a subtheme of culturally responsive pedagogy that lived within the experiences the study's participants had with teachers they characterized as caring. Expectations of academic success for Black students along with the inclusion and valuing of students' cultures within the traditional school environment were practices that stood out as examples of active care.

### ***Provide Freedom to Define Success***

The next theme emerging from the interviews was a freedom to define success outside of narrow and traditional terms. This showed up in the participant interview in two main ways. First, participants were confident in *differing definitions of success*. In selecting the population for this study, current status as a college student was used as an indicator of resilience. Especially given that all participants identify as Black and therefore have been exposed to antiblackness as adversity throughout their K-12 career. Therefore, it is extremely relevant to consider how these students who have overcome adversity actually define what success is. The second subtheme that lives

within this theme focuses on the practices of educational institutions, specifically *institutional embrace of alternative success measures*.

**Differing definitions of success.** It was enlightening to note that these students, who all ended up in college, had differing definitions of success. Cornelius described the struggle of defining success as a child in Southeast DC and how that struggle ultimately clarified success for him:

I believe success for me personally is just fulfilling my, not only my dream job, But something that impacts the world. And that comes from just the way I grew up. Growing up in Southeast DC, one of the things that I think was hard was trying to figure out what is success... So success for me, now that I've kind of beat every statistic there was, and even made it to my senior year of college is looking like, well there's a brother in Southeast whose name may not be [--], but they are looking at the same challenges I have. And so that's why I personally have chosen to go into education actually as a career field. I'm working with KIPP DC. Just looking back, I feel like I'm being successful in that aspect, because I'm going back and making a change to the community that raised me.

As Cornelius spoke, he also brought up an idea that was consistent in many of the participant responses. The ability to define success for themselves and to separate it from traditional ideas such as academic performance, money and certain careers resulted in motivation that fueled resilience. He continued:

Say a brother at Morehouse who may not have come from that background, maybe they come from a wealthy family and have done X, Y, and Z. Now they're going to work for Chase Bank. That's what success looks like for them. But as

long as they feel as though they're making an impact, and change in their community or where they grew up, or not even their community, just in the world in general, that is success. And everybody's path for success looks different.

When asked what experience impacted his ability to succeed, Erin brought up a middle school teacher and stated that “she would tell me that everyone doesn’t have the same path you know? And that I might struggle with some things, but I was good at others”. When asked how that helped define his own personal view of success, Erin added:

It helped me define it because I was not so worried about comparing myself to other people and it made me think about what I was actually good at. At the time, I loved to draw and even though that wasn’t officially what mattered at school, she knew that I liked it and would bring it up or ask me about it. I even remember being put in charge of illustrating things when we would work in groups and she would say I was good at it so I should take that part in the group. I think that helped me think about a strength as that because it was actually needed.

There is further evidence in the transcripts to show that this permission to expand ideas about what success can mean provides an opportunity for the participants to rely on their own experiences and strengths to overcome adversity. When asked about her definition of success, Jada shared the following:

Success to me is ultimately in alignment with my passion and my purpose. So it's never been like money or achieving some type of wealth. I feel like with being in alignment with those things, I'll be able to get those things. So it's never been having titles, it's more so like fulfilling my purpose here... So it's not that I

developed this idea of success at a young age, I had to kind of grow into it. I think that I had different narratives that were kind of opposed to this growing up. I don't think that they really affirmed my idea of success.

When prompted, Jada went on to describe a teacher who actually pushed her to define success for herself saying “He really kept asking me frustrating questions like who are you really? Who are you apart from what your parents say you are, from what your friends and family say you are?” A key in each of these examples is that the practices of educators that allowed for the defining of success are intentional in highlighting that it is personal and based on your own experiences, characteristics, and desires. Thelma’s description of her own experience in high school mimics this pattern and highlights its significance:

I was one of very few Black students in my classes and I felt like in some classes there was this way to succeed. It was a lot of pressure if you didn’t do things a certain way or... because it would be like you did not check the box. You didn’t get it done. And it just felt like as a Black student I felt singled out and I don’t know if that was just my perception, but it felt that way. So in Ms. [--] class, she would just make me feel successful even though I would struggle sometimes. It was okay to do things my way and that made it okay for me too.

Jordan, who recognizes certain times in his K-12 career when his self-efficacy was higher than others, highlighted the impact of defining success personally in motivational terms:

If I focused solely on getting to the goal everyone else was talking about then I didn’t care. An example is college even though I ended up in college so that's

funny. But that never motivated me growing up... it was more about trying to be able to do certain things to help my friends and family. That's really what motivated me to not fail at school and moving forward because it was a means to an end. But yea when teachers would just talk about you have to do this so you can get into college, that just didn't really connect with me. It wasn't a reason to do it.

Though there are some similarities that will be discussed later in this chapter across each of these definitions of success, the key here is that the ability to define success in a way that might be different from those around them provided two mitigating factors in their overall resilience: motivation and self-efficacy. Cornelius spoke to his ability to shift his ideas of success over time and how that was dependent upon the environment:

Certain benchmarks of success look different. When I was in Southeast DC, my benchmark for success was just going to school every day. But now I'm at Morehouse it's like, oh yeah, my benchmark for success has climbed. And so I think it definitely depends on the area and stage that you're in in life. I've had the ability to really sit back and really think about success to me, sure, six figure job. That sounds nice, but will I be happy at the end of the day? So being happy and just fulfilling the duty of giving back to so many communities, or touch at least one person's life that I can, is, to me, what success looks like.

Also its important to highlight the role of educators in many of these definitions of success. As Celice highlights in discussing success and what impacted her ability to succeed,

Honestly my teachers determined whether I felt successful or not because I knew what I was good at and if I couldn't bring any of that to the table, it just felt like an environment where I was not going to do well. Because for me success means that I love what I do and that it makes my life and the lives of the people I care about easier. That's why I don't call getting As success. Because I've gotten As in classes that don't mean anything to me before and that just felt like doing whatever I needed to pass instead of feeling like I had succeeded at something. So I think that understanding that it has to be more than like grades or money or a certain thing everybody else cares about to really be successful is important for teachers to know.

The role of teachers in many of the participants' experiences with defining success helps orient us to considering the next subtheme which is that the educational institution itself can have a significant impact on whether the freedom to define success is available to students.

**Institutional embrace of alternative success measures.** There was significant evidence within participant experiences that showed practices at the *institutional level* that were examples of this theme in action. Vernon described two different school environments that he remembers as having varied impacts on his ability to succeed. One, at a middle school that he describes as "... extremely structured. Everything had rules... you had certain ways to ask questions, to go to the bathroom, to sharpen your pencil. It was literally like a rulebook, you know for everything." He then goes on to describe feeling rebellious in that environment and feeling as though it was impossible to succeed:

So at a certain level, it was impossible to not mess up in my opinion. And they would reward you with these points and certain people always had the highest points. After a while, I just didn't care anymore and I would do things knowing I would get in trouble... it was supposed to motivate you but it just felt like they wanted everybody to be the exact same and I was like who cares if you sit a certain way as long as you are learning something. It was definitely the K-12 environment that was the worst for me as far as success goes which is funny because they always talked about going to college and doing well academically, but it's where I cared about all that the least.

In the second environment described, the high school he attended for his freshman and sophomore year, he compares it saying he remembers "it feeling totally different, exact opposite. There was freedom that I was not used to so for a while I didn't really know what to do." When asked what practices were different in the second environment, Vernon described less focus on academic performance and what felt like less control over interactions with students and teachers. He stated:

My teachers seemed more interested in who we were versus making sure we were sticking to rules all the time. My favorite teacher at that time was Ms. [--] and what I really liked about her class was that she always asked how we were and then she actually listened. Like you could tell she was listening because of the way she would respond and it felt like okay she cares about what's going with me and she knows me. She had time to actually talk to us because it wasn't so controlled and regulated. At my middle school, you had to stay on schedule at all times and I couldn't keep up. But high school was different in... most ways



really because... you could feel the difference. It was freedom but still guided by the people there like the teachers and the administrators but it was enough freedom that you could be yourself. That's what made me want to do well.

Thelma also discussed the importance of the culture of the educational institution in determining her ability to define success:

My elementary school was, it was a place that encouraged you to think outside the box and would make a big deal out of things that weren't necessarily academic. Like for example, my biggest memory of elementary school was this play I was a part of and I was a stage manager and was in charge of making sure everyone knew their lines and I ran rehearsals and everything. And the school made such a big deal out of the play and it was really student run and when we finally presented it to everybody, I remember feeling so proud and all of us felt that way. And that had nothing to do with class, but I think it helped us do better academically because we were able to do well in a lot of different things instead of everyone feeling like getting the best grades was the only way to get praise and to get attention at the school. It just made it a better environment for everyone.

Jordan continues this trend of targeting institutional practice as a key factor in what supported him in being successful in K-12 environments and beyond:

In 8th grade, all my teachers switched how they grade and they would, they would allow us to redo things. I think it was happening across the whole school but I know for sure all my teachers changed. So it was such as we had a certain test or assignment, we'd get a grade but then you had a chance to learn more and get better. And then the grade would be replaced if you did better on something that

proved you learned it. I think that is something all schools should do because it makes students want to keep learning and not give up just because you don't get something or get it the first time. And that's connected to success because you can be successful by putting in more work, it's not automatic failure.

In the end, all ten participants discussed intentionally thinking of success outside of traditional norms. This highlights the potential motivating power in not only supporting individual definitions of success, but also allowing for those definitions to exist and have value within educational institutions. When considering Unger, Ghazinour, and Richter's (2013) discussion around the impact of schools acting as quality environments having a positive impact of resilience, it would be expected that schools that value the same things students see as equating to success could be seen as higher quality. For the Black students that made up this study's sample there is a pattern when discussing what equates to success. Eight of the ten participants mention doing for others in their definition of success. Saydrianna talked both about her personal happiness and the ability to give back:

So I think success is really based on how happy you are and how satisfied you are with what you're doing. And so, growing up I was doing a lot of community service. Like, a lot. I was working with children. I was, my mom started an organization called Rage in 2010 and I've been working with them ever since. And I just feel like, giving back really measured my success because it kind of worked out in the end, going to Spelman and getting a scholarship, them acknowledging like, Oh, you like to give back. Okay, well we're going to give back to you. And it's just like, I think that's what I really think is success, right?

Similarly, Chazmine defined success as “as doing the greatest amount of good that impacts the greatest amount of people” while Erin discussed “making sure those around me have what they need. My family, my friends, my community... you can’t really be successful if everyone else is suffering.” This pattern provides a basis for the next theme being discussed in this paper: promotion of a collectivist culture. However, in order for that culture to be valuable at all, students must feel that this particular definition of success can be connected and relevant to the educational environment they interact with daily. As Cornelius points out:

What was going on in the neighborhood or even at home was different than what was going on at the school. So sometimes it feels like your goals don’t match, they don’t match what you’re trying to do in school. For me, I was the first person in my family to go to college, but that was not a... it was not a thing like I needed to do this to be successful. But I did have people who put it in me that it could be a good option. At the same time, don’t put down not going to college because that was my family you know and the people I cared about outside of school. None of them went to college but that doesn’t mean necessarily they’re not successful.

Being cognizant that success means different things to students will start to provide the space for developing self-efficacy and motivation for students but valuing those perspectives within institutional practice requires intentional shifts toward reflection inclusive practice that doesn’t subconsciously look down upon alternative realities of success.

**Summary of theme 3.** The freedom to define success is key to impacting the motivation of students and ensuring their belief that they have the ability to succeed. In considering practices that promote resilience for Black students, it is important to intentionally make space for various definitions of success within education, which traditionally defines success with very narrow parameters. The participant experiences gathered through interviews in this study highlighted the consequences of narrow views of success and also showed that these students, who have shown that they are resilient and can overcome diversity, also have nontraditional views of success. For educational institutions, granting the freedom to define success is multifaceted: it includes valuing student voice and changing institutional practices to expand measures of success.

***Promote a collectivist culture***

The final theme emerging from the interviews concerning how to impact Black student resilience is the promotion of a collectivist culture. Seen through the definitions of success for most participants as mentioned above, there was a trend of showing concern for the collective group that was expressed throughout their shared experiences. More specifically, students surfaced ensuring a *collectivist school culture* and *collective community success*.

**Collectivist school culture.** To frame the idea of a collectivist school culture, Jada's discussion of a component of her school's culture that was very different from that of her home environment is relevant:

I think that being at school, school is really connected, the public school system is really connected to society and it mirrors it. So I was introduced to capitalist ideologies like individualism and competition and things like that, and that really

didn't blend well with the ideologies that I carried, not only as a black girl in America but also being rooted in my Ethiopian culture. So with my family, my mother grew up in a village and my dad grew up in a similar village and it was all about being, understanding that your effort is to support another person's effort and we're a community and so if you're successful, I'm successful. But then in school it was like I had all these friends that were just competitive. We had a big poster on our wall in some of the classrooms where it would rank the students.

In line with Jada's ideas, eight of the ten interviewees discussed the idea that either success or an important part of their culture was related to the collective community's success. Vernon supported Jada's memory of the practice of ranking in classrooms stating "it was always about who was at the top or the bottom". These types of practices that not only value individual accomplishment but that discourage collaboration and peer support fail to support the needs of students who require a sense of connection and kinship to thrive. Celice discussed the atmosphere in her favorite learning environments in K-12, sharing that "classes that let you talk and discuss and interact with each other" were most conducive to her learning style. Thelma also described elements of a collectivist culture that were a part of one of her most supportive learning environments:

I do remember some of my teachers felt like groups were, it was where we would cheat in a way. Every time we would ask to be in groups or work with a partner it would be like we were trying to be disruptive or not work but that was not what we were trying to do. And I never understood that because if I understand something, I should be able to help my friends understand too. The whole point is to learn it.

In direct conflict with the group's ideas about personal success being dependent upon the success of others, this description of educational environments that value individual success and are not set up to encourage collaboration and group support was also common among participants. This was particularly relevant when participants responded to a question that asked whether they ever experienced any school cultural norms that were in conflict with the cultures of their home/community. For Erin, it was the difference in understanding the role he took within his family and how that responsibility was not a burden from his perspective:

My high school was very competitive to get into and it was expected that you did A certain amount of homework every night. But with my sisters and brothers and picking them up because of my mom's job I didn't always have that time. Some teachers understood but some tried to make it like I shouldn't be responsible for them but that's just how my family worked and it was not something, something that I didn't want to have to do.

The lack of value placed on Erin's role within his family, and most importantly, the pride he took in that role represents a misunderstanding of what community means in some cultures. This is also reflected in the experiences of participants who spoke of what feeling connected and reflected in the school culture meant to their motivation and ability to succeed. Jordan spoke of remembering his middle school as a place that "knew who we were and cared what we thought". He went on to say that because he felt valued, he was more invested in the school and felt more inclined to engage:

They did things that you would think are little you know like calling out your name on the intercom and giving you a button to wear on your birthday. And

then other things were bigger. The principal knew who we all were and cared when we weren't there. She would say something when you came back after being out and it just felt like it mattered if you were there or not.

Tommy also mentioned a collectivist culture as a factor in "whether or not [he] cared about school". A specific incident with a teacher stands out to him from his high school experience in which he stated "she made the classroom feel like family... honestly I'd go to school just to go to her class." When asked what the teacher did specifically that produced that familial atmosphere, he mentioned her having deep knowledge about each students' family situations, interests, and weaknesses which she integrated into the lessons and other interactions she had with the students. He also added:

She was big on everyone pushing each other in class and so then you just felt like we were all learning so it was okay not to know sometimes... it felt safe to be yourself and not get put down or labeled as slower than others.

This idea of family as a synonym for collectivist culture was also on display when discussing the way discipline occurred within the school. Cornelius described a traumatic experience he remembers:

One of the most humiliating things, when I look back on it, I'm like this is the dumbest system I've ever heard in my life, is that they made you put a sticker on, a bright yellow sticker when you got in trouble and it's called the bench, and it says, I'm working on it. You don't get to eat lunch with your friends. When you're on there, when you're on that disciplinary system, it really feels like prison and we had a paycheck system. We had to earn two days worth of signatures to get off the bench. To get off your parent has to come up for a meeting and you have to say a

speech in front of the whole school. So that's the way you get off and it is really one of those, like yeah it worked in the moment but when I look back on it, it was really humiliating.

Cornelius goes on to describe how this system was used to separate certain students from the whole:

That system was like, sure when I look back on them now, yeah you kind of needed to be benched for that, but there were other ways to handle that situation than publicly humiliating that kid, because you don't know whether they're doing it for attention, so they're going to do it again. Or what's going on at home that caused them to do that reaction, but definitely, when I look back on that system, that method, it had a negative impact that makes them like I don't even want to be over there. It made me fear it and not want to be a part of that group, but also I feel bad for my friends. Why do they have to be humiliated like that?

Outside of the individual practices of teachers, the participants have outlined here the institutional practices that directly impact school culture, such as discipline systems, grading policies, and instructional practice. They have also framed a collectivist bend for that culture is necessary in order to serve as a quality environment for students.

**Collective community success.** When participants spoke of experiences that supported their resilience and likelihood of success in K-12, they also commented on the importance of teachers and leaders who emphasized what was happening outside the immediate school environment. Vernon remembered the time after the Trayvon Martin verdict as a time that was especially hard for his peers and praised a teacher who “gave us time to talk it out and also helped us talk about what we could do outside of school to



make a difference... we were frustrated and felt that really helped.” Another participant, Celice, offered an alternative view of what happened in a similar situation when that attention to the collectivist culture was not present stating:

Some classes felt very separate from real life... I remember wanting to get to certain classes so we could talk about how we were all feeling but some teachers acted like everything should go on as normal. It just felt like they didn't care but at the same time we cared a lot because what was happening was really about us too.

Whether considering the internal culture of the group within the school walls or assigning value to the communities from which students come, the benefits of promoting a collectivist culture for Black students are well documented within this study's participant experiences. Jada reflected on an experience that enlightened her view of the importance of community outreach and ensuring that her community's voice was valued and present within the educational system:

I also had an interesting experience in high school because from 11th to 12th grade, I also was a student liaison on the school board. So I was able to see how just the different layers of what it takes to run a school, like a whole school district. So the school board was composed of all white people and most of them weren't from the area and some of them weren't from, they weren't from the city and some of them were also from... They were parents of the most affluent students in the school district. So I remember just constantly having to advocate for the black students, even if I specifically didn't relate to certain experiences that

they had. It just always baffled me how certain things were just like a phenomenon to these members.

She continued by highlighting that the key to her need for advocacy was a complete blindspot of the authority, specifically the school board, to the needs and experiences of Black students stating ‘it is impossible to make decisions for the best of the entire community if you are not lifting up the voices of the entire community.’”

This subtheme of collective community success was also present in the power of parental engagement. Cornelius suggested the following as a structural improvement across education when attempting to empower black students:

I think one thing that needs to be encouraged at all levels is parent involvement. When I switched over from public school, my mom started to get a lot of calls, grandma started to get a lot of calls from the school. She's like, why you have to call me about every little thing. But it was to engage the parents and that engagement, I didn't realize how important it was until I got to high school. I'm going to my friends high school, at 12th grade, I go to his house and they're like, what's FAFSA? That's a problem.

Erin also spoke of valuing the family and what they can mean for the learning process and community.

It was about not assuming I came from people who didn't care what I did or couldn't support me. Even if that support looked different, it did sometimes. But my thing was I can't separate from my neighborhood. You always knew when something if something happened in the neighborhood because you felt it at

school. That's where being connected to the parents and to the community could be so helpful for these schools. You'll get through to more students for sure.

**Summary of theme 4.** A collectivist culture is one that values the needs of the group or community over the individual. Each of the participants carried this theme of group over individual and the impact of that belief within their responses. Their experiences highlighted the positive impact of feeling that their educational community had a culture that valued their whole selves and that understood the need to build and nurture relationships. Within a majority society that tends to value individualism, personal gain, and self-promotion, promoting a collectivist culture requires intentional attention to the needs of the group and their community and will also require the dismantling of traditional norms within educational institutions.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications**

Analysis of the participant interviews resulted in four themes that emerged when considering the study's research questions. This section will discuss the findings for each question by comparing the results to literature. In addition, it will connect the surfaced themes to the elements of the *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* constructed from the literature and will also discuss implications for educational institutions who serve Black students. By highlighting themes that emerge directly from participant experiences, the study seeks to determine if the Black student voice validates the *CCI Framework* in a meaningful way so that it can inform next steps and any necessary modifications. The section will then discuss contributions to the field and recommendations for educational institutions.

### **Comparison to Literature**

In order to inform critically conscious institutions, the study explores the literature around transformative potential, antiblackness, resilience capacity, and Afrocentric principles. The *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* integrates each of these concepts by proposing intentionality in the way they can connect to increase Black student resilience. The central factor for impact on resilience is transformative potential which consists of critical reflection and critical action. Therefore, the purpose of the following discussion is to determine whether the experiences of Black students in K-12 schools are in alignment with what is expected based on the literature. Specifically does critical reflection based on awareness of antiblackness and critical action steeped in Afrocentric principles result in improved resilience capacity according to *these students*?

### ***Impacting Critical Consciousness through Transformative Potential***

**Critical reflection through the anti-black lens.** The literature suggests that within an antiblack system, the experiences of Black students would reflect the adversity with which they grapple daily. Papageorge, Gershenson, and Kang (2018) report that expectations for Black students by white teachers are significantly lower than those for Black students and this has a direct impact on students' ultimate success. This was supported by the experiences of several students interviewed for the study. Jada, for instance, spoke of the *othering* of black girls in her school and perceptions that those in the school had of Black girls as defiant and belligerent. Similarly, Celice bemoaned the need for success to be more regularly equated with Black students in the country, specifically calling out images of Blackness that are steeped in negative perceptions. In these experiences and more, the literature is living through the voices of these students. Also in line with the literature describing the experience of Black students in anti-Black K-12 institutions is the frequent reference to the importance of Black teachers and their role in the mitigation of the negative impacts that stem from Blackness as adversity. Tommy spoke directly about how it was the support of Black teachers that provided him with resilience needed to deal with being a Black man in America. In addition, seven more of the ten participants specifically called out Black teachers as the key to their success in school; a reality that qualifies Redding's (2019) review of the positive impact that same race teachers have on both behavior and academic performance.

This pattern of alignment continues when you consider other realities for Black students in the K-12 realm. There has been a consistent reporting over overrepresentation of Black students with disciplinary action in the form of referral, suspensions, and

expulsions (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan & Leaf, 2010; Gregory & Roberts, 2017). This phenomenon was also consistent with what was found in the study. Also suggested by the findings is that Black students are often faced with lowered expectations and a different caliber of instruction due to bias in perceptions. TNTP (2018) supports these findings as well as they find that there is a significant difference in the frequency of access to high quality, grade level materials between classes composed of mostly Black versus mostly and white students.

To summarize, the findings of the study fully support the literature's standing that Black students experience negative outcomes in the K-12 system at a disproportionately higher rate than white students and that these outcomes are connected to the practices and perceptions of educators. This supports the *CCI Framework's* proposition that critical reflection should occur through a lens intentionally focused on antiblackness. Specifically, the findings elevate the *Blackness as significant* lens for institutions to be able to consider what adversity is occurring due to students identity as Black and to ensure that colorblindness is not at work within school decision making.

**Informing critical action with Afrocentric tenets.** Building on the results of critically reflecting through the lens of Blackness as adversity, the critical action component of the transformative potential framework must address what was found. Standing with literature comparing the Eurocentric and Afrocentric worldview, the findings of the study suggest that not only is intentional celebration of Blackness a mitigating factor in Black student resilience, but that there are also clear connections between the practices Black students identify as supportive, motivating, and keys to success and the Afrocentric tenets outlined by Schiele (as cited by Stewart, 2004). There

are significant findings that suggest practices inspired by the idea that *Human identity is a collective identity* are beneficial to Black students. An entire theme surfaced around the promotion of a collectivist culture within schools that highlights the individual's responsibility to the group and the responsibility of the group to empower and uplift the individual. In addition, the findings also suggest that the ability to define alternative definitions of success and the educational institutions valuing those definitions is a key factor in improving Black student resilience. When digging into the descriptions of success for the participants interviewed, who described success as involving peace, happiness, loving what they do, and the assurance that others are being supported, there surfaces a direct connection to the idea of *spiritual conscientiousness*, or the valuing of the nonmaterial aspects of life as equal to the material components of life.

Yet another connection to Afrocentric tenets is the idea of *harmony with nature*. Johnson (2001) defined this as the value placed on alternative knowledge and forms of understanding. Again, this was strongly supported in the findings as participants discussed the importance of social emotional learning, community activism, and defining success outside of the narrow terms of test scores. Specifically, participants highlighted practices in line with Jones and Bouffard's (2012) conclusion that SEL skills should be integrated into daily interaction with students. In comparing the surfaced themes of the study, it is clear that those actions are reminiscent of the assumptions with Afrocentric thought and support that component of the *CCI Framework*.

**Impacting resilience capacity.** Ungar (2011) suggests that impacting resilience capacity can be guided by a social-ecological model of resilience that focuses interventions with the environment of the person to enhance their ability to experience

well-being despite adversity. The findings of the study support much of the literature that focuses on the students microsystem consisting of family, peers, and teachers. Much of the storytelling done by participants was based on the intentional actions of individual educators and it is clear that those educators who exist in this realm offer a lifeline of sorts to students who must overcome adversity. Where the findings also push past much of the resilience literature is in considering the role of the institution in improving the quality of the school environment. Though not as prevalent as the findings supporting intervention across the microsystem of students, there is enough to suggest that institutional practices are actually informed by the individuals making up that institution and that the if leaders are informed and believe in the best critical action steps for Black students, more individuals can become lifelines, eventually transforming the institution itself into a lifeline to improve resilience for Black students in an anti-Black world.

**Conclusions on transformative potential.** As we consider the critical action component of the framework; we should note that it is critical reflection upon the experiences of Black students that can inform why we encourage school and their employees to take certain critical action. Furthermore, they seemed to exist in a cause and effect context that at its root suggest that because blackness is significant, it presents adversity; therefore, there is a need to take action to intentionally celebrate it and infuse its assumptions into the environments with which Black students interact every day. This relationship between what must be understood (reflected upon) and what should occur because of that understanding (action steps) is reflective of the idea of transformational potential that serves as a foundation of this study. It is also important to consider that the level of critical reflection and action that takes place can vary and the push for



institutions would be to learn from the examples of individuals who have proven their transformative potential through work with students. The findings support the idea that failure to critically reflect, which Jemal (2017) characterizes as denial, will lead to not only avoidant action, but destructive action. This means that a failure to act intentionally to increase the transformative potential schools have for Black students is to allow destructive behavior that harms resilience in Black students.

### **Contribution to the Field**

This study's contribution to the field is in the intentionality of centering Blackness within the discussion of a transformative potential framework meant to measure critical consciousness and consider its impact on the resilience of students. Specifically, by attaching antiblackness to the reflection component and Afrocentric principles to the action component, this study hoped to provide a *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* that does the specific work of positively impacting the resilience capacity of Black students. Additionally, this study elevates the voices of the target beneficiary of this work; the Black student. Holistic education is not possible without the consideration of the whole person. Neglecting to consider the Blackness of our Black students and what that means for their reality in this world is a commitment to a partial, and in some cases damaging, education. By adding their authentic voices to the literature, this study expands the knowledge base and diversifies it in a way that will be beneficial not only for Black students, but for all those who want to holistically educate children in the most supportive and aware way possible.

## **Implications for K-12 Practice**

The implications for K-12 practice are discussed through the lens of transformative potential. The components of this model, critical reflection and critical action, can be considered to determine practical steps forward for institutions of education.

### ***Critical Reflection***

Dismantle policy models that are colorblind and do not take Blackness into account when planning for the success of Black students.

- **Recognize that Blackness is significant.** Identifying in this world as Black means something. For most, it means navigating a world where outcomes are inequitable and resilience is about controlling the rage in the face of ever present adversity. Without intentional reflection on the impact of Blackness on students outcomes, institutional policy, and educator practice, the actions taken by institutions are not critical in nature. They do not highlight the source of the adversity nor do they specifically address the adversity.
- **Identify and utilize anti-racist organizational tools.** Institutions are made up of people who bring their bias, worldview, personal experience, and habits to the table. Engage with organizations who provide training and resources to move the organization into critical reflection together in a way that centers students and values the voice of those often underrepresented.

### ***Critical Action***

Utilize the Nguzo Saba as a framework for evaluating institutional practices.

- **Allow for alternative sources of knowledge.** The findings of this study highlight that the practices self-identified by students as supportive, motivating, and key to their success were steeped deeply in tenets of Afrocentric thought. Using the Ngoza Saba as an assessment of practice can serve as a guide informed by a counter narrative in the K-12 education conversation; the Black student.
  - (a) Umoja (unity)
  - (b) Kujichagulia (self-determination)
  - (c) Ujima (cooperative economics)
  - (d) Nia (purpose)
  - (e) Kuumba (creativity)
  - (f) Imani (faith)

One example here is to consider what deliverables from students are valued within the school? Is there opportunity for the principle of Kuumba (creativity) to be valued and integrated into the model for success? Another example is to consider policies around hair, clothes, and movement within the building. Kujichagulia (self determination) speaks to defining, naming, and speaking for ourselves. Consider if the everyday policies students encounter allow for this to occur.

- **Hire Black teachers.** A key understanding of this work is that any school can work to be more critically conscious and to support Black students. We do know from the literature and most importantly, from the lived experiences of Black students themselves, that Black teachers matter. There is value in the Black experience and a key component of mitigating the impact of Blackness as

adversity is the intentional celebration and the cultural competence that can come from having these lived experiences yourself. Though this in no way impacts the need for training that is critically conscious in nature, the mere presence of Black bodies in schools can serve as a defining intervention to improve Black student resilience.

### **Summary**

This study sought to inform educational institutions on developing critical consciousness as a method of intervention for improving resiliency of Black students. In order to inform the proposed *Critically Conscious Institution Framework* the study used semi-structured interviews to access the lived experiences of Black students who have graduated from the K-12 school system and to determine what school related factors and characteristics most impacted their personal resilience capacity and success level. The findings of the study were in line with framework surfacing four themes including (a) center blackness, (2) actively care, (3) freedom to define success, and (4) promote a collectivist culture. The findings also served to answer the key research questions being addressed by the study. It was found that the ability of the institution to center blackness and promote a collective culture were the school-related factors that impacted personal resilience capacity of Black students. When considering success, a freedom to define personal success and a valuing of alternative success measures were the most important interventions schools could engage in and in order to provide the nurturing environment necessary to develop environments equipped to support students in adverse conditions, active care is a necessary trait of people, practices, and policies. These results also supported a discussion that encourages institutions to ground critical reflection and

critical action in the current reality and needs of Black students. Once schools are able to center the idea of Blackness as adversity within their critical reflective practices, the actions institutions take should be more conducive to nurturing and positively impacting the resilience of Black students.

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