SCHOOL DAZE: DEPICTIONS OF BLACK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN FILM

BY

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all of the scholars who are battling with family, friend, spirits, relationships and their own minds. Stay encouraged and see this through! You will be glad you did. You are fearfully and wonderfully made and this is just a stepping stone to a more prosperous future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

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Education and media are essential elements in our socialization. Each serves as an influential resource that has the ability to portray experiences from different perspectives. Particularly, films involving educational experiences can help portray the realities of students from various backgrounds.

This research focuses on educational experiences of Black high school students through an analysis of their portrayal in films. This study uses a comparative ethnographic content analysis to expose how media may influence social relationships. In addition, it may help society better understand how "fictional narratives about education" influence perception of real teachers and students (Gregory 2007:7). This examination of these messages can provide evidence on the need to improve critical media literacy, which decreases the likelihood of those messages negatively impacting our social understanding and behaviors.

Examining how high school education experiences of Black students compared to White students are depicted in films gives insight on how society views certain groups educational attainment. If stereotypes dominate films, the perception of different groups may mislead, confuse, and impoverish evaluations and expectations about education (Vandermeersche, Soetaert, and Rutten 2013). Adhering to Critical Race Theory and methodology and symbolic interactionism, the following study address how the messages syndicated in films may have implications on the social understanding of Black students, their teachers, and educational environments.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education and media and are both instrumental elements in our socialization. Media is central to communicating what happens in the world (Happer and Philo 2013) and education teaches us cultural norms and values, which are often reinforced by classmates, teachers and textbooks (Little and McGivern 2013).

Per Little, Williams and McGivern (2013) systems of mass education focus on homogenization and social sorting as the main socialization tasks. Students learn standardized curriculums, cultures and knowledge basis. Students who are educated in classrooms are also taught a "common sense of society's official priorities, and more importantly, they learn to locate their place within it" (Little et al. 2013). Through this social sorting students begin to identify their place in society and the trajectories that are available to them based on their status. Schools and classrooms are keen agencies for normalization and social understanding.

According to Couldry (2012), there are many components (like formal education) and processes that contribute to our world, but it is media that fixates these processes as 'fact' through inclusion into our everyday routines. Media can characterize the affairs of many races, cultures and institutions to expose people to the lifestyles of communities they are not directly associated with or have limited access to. Media is also used to encapsulate eras for historical reference. Films portraying educational experiences can inform viewers about students, teachers, and overall classroom climate. At the same time, the framing and meanings propagated in films have social consequences (Couldry 2012).

If media misrepresents cultures, races, and classes it is possible that those depictions can translate to society's overall perception. Although education is a valued

social entity in the United States, studies conclude that Black American and White American students do not share the same educational experiences (Solórzano and Yosso 2001; Joseph-Salisbury and Andrews 2017).

Since media and education are imperative to social understandings and interactions (Macnamara 2005; Gregory 2007; Couldry 2012; Happer and Philo 2013; Little et al 2013), it is important to have accurate representations of the academic performances of Black and White students within media to yield a well-informed society. Yet there is little representation of educational classroom performances within mass media, particularly of Black high school students. The films and television shows that do feature student and teachers focus primarily on their lifestyles, rather than the instructional processes.

According to scholars, many of the films that feature Black students' educational experiences are framed under a cinematic lens that perpetuates racial stereotypes which can have grave impacts on real-world understanding of Black American students' educational experiences and capabilities.

The purpose of this study is to address how the messages syndicated in films may have implications on the social understanding of Black students, their teachers, and educational environments. I use a comparative ethnographic content analysis of depictions of high school education experiences of Black students in films. This content analysis exposes narratives that may influence social relationships and also helps to better understand how "fictional narratives about education" have the potential to influence perception of real teachers and students (Gregory 2007:7).

This research is significant because it is a pathway to understanding how media

depictions of Black and minority students in education can affect the social perception of them. These perceptions can possibly affect teaching methods and ultimately policies for education. This examination of these messages can provide evidence on the need to improve critical media literacy, which decreases the likelihood of those messages negatively impacting our social understanding and behaviors. Second, there is limited comprehensive sociological research on racialized student depictions in film. Consequently, this study will broaden areas of research about both media and education and how they coincide with the understanding of classroom environments and expectations of students and teachers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars argue that media has contributed to many behavioral and psychological changes in viewers. Although there are positive changes attributed to media use, like exposure to public issues and diverse cultures, many negative changes such as low self-esteem, decreasing attention spans, and desensitization (Linz et al.1984; Russello 2009) are also effects of media narratives. Media makes truth claims, explicitly and implicitly. The gaps in the truth and the repetitions in media representations can distort peoples' sense of what there is to see in the social and political domains (Couldry 2012). The narratives that overtake our television screens become embedded into the culture and augment the understanding of groups portrayed. These narratives have contributed to a stereotype culture that impacts many youths understanding of their identity (Osborne 2001). Many youths have struggled to find characters that they can identify with in the media due to lacking or inaccurate representation (Horton, Price, Brown 1999). Particularly, people of color have been subjected to perpetual negative stereotyping through media narratives.

As a result, society is consistently exposed to distorted images of racial groups. Students who identify with racial groups that have an existing negative stereotype develop greater levels of anxiety about confirming the negative group stereotype. The struggles with identity and stereotype have directly affected many primary and secondary aged students' academic performance (Steele and Aronson 1995; Osborne 2001).

Though the research on film depictions of Black high school students in educational settings is limited, a few contemporary studies explore the influence of media and the perception of high school education.

Black Imagery in Media. Narratives are the stories, events, and experiences represented in mass media. Many media scholars have explained that the portrayal of racial and ethnic groups in media sets the foundation to how others interpret their lives (Horton, Price and Brown 1999). These images influence the perception of people and formulate an expectation for certain lifestyles, personalities and occupations for the respective groups.

Historically, Black imagery in media and film has been saturated in racialized stereotype. African-Americans in television have been depicted as service or blue-collar employees, helpers, inferior, lazy, dangerous, uneducated, sexual, rebellious, noisy and untrained (Punyanunt-Carter 2008; Lewis, Poats, Davis 2016). These narratives have been active in the development of the social understanding of African-American people and culture (Bourne 1990, Urwand 2018). Regardless of accuracy, many screenwriters tend to adhere to these descriptions as phenomena, since they are deemed traditional. This is done in an effort to maintain a standard for the represented groups (Parks 2004). Inaccuracies and generalizations of Black images in film and media are problematic to the progression of society due to its significance to the history of racism (Urwand 2018).

Even as society evolves to a purportedly post racial society, content creators who curate content about racial groups other than their own are highly selective in their creations. Generally, these curators recycle stereotypical stories and images in an to represent Blacks in America. These inaccurate narratives were maintained to stay consistent and relevant. Rather than allowing for progression, the continuation of these images suppress the social understanding of Black Americans and produce racialized ideologies (Pimentel and Santillanes 2015).

Scholars have found that certain media depictions can lower self-esteem (Russello 2009). Bourne (1990:15) states that "…whether it comes from the daily news broadcast, a documentary or a feature film, the gathering and distribution of information and opinion is the primary way for any group to evaluate its position in a society and to decide how they feel about the position". Students much like any other group seek information and opinion distributed in media and film as a way to evaluate their position in society. The portrayal of unrealistic interactions makes it difficult for both teachers and students to navigate within their classroom because of the misconception of their roles. Black students exposed to inherently racist depictions of them may have a difficult time determining how they feel about their depicted position based on their actual position as a "vulnerable" group.

Although the quantity of Black images has increased, the quality has not. Many scholars argue that racial images are often controlled by those in power and created to affirm the psychology of those that control them (Pimentel and Santillanes 2015; Urwand 2018). Urwand (2018) further states that many of the content creators are white men who are creating images based upon their understanding of Black Americans which is rooted in a harsh history of servitude and slavery of African Americans, thus perpetually generating perverted imagery of Blacks.

According to Adams-Bass, Stevenson, and Kotzin (2014) early television and films exaggerated representations of Black people as unintelligent and/or illiterate and uncivil. They also showcased these representations with White actors in blackface. Historical stereotypes of blacks in media include "Toms," the friendly servant; "Coons," the clownish, goodhearted buffoon; "Bucks," refer to the threatening, hyper masculine,

muscular male figure; and "Mulattos," the sexy, sensual, exotic sex symbol. The women

that take on this stereotype were typically lighter skinned, shapely black women (i.e.

Dorothy Dandridge) (Bourne 1990:12). Another prominent female stereotype portrayed

dark-skinned, heavy set maid or cook roles as "Mammies". These stereotypes were

already associated with well-known pre-cinema entertainment known as minstrel shows[1]

(Urwand 2018).

As a retort to these stereotypes, Blaxploitation films[2] became popular in the early

to mid 1970's (Bourne 1990; Hughey 2009). Unlike the concept of the "magical negro",

blaxploitation films perpetuated images that were occupied with cartoonish stereotypes

similar to the historic typing of "coon", "bucks", et cetera, but were consumed by Black

Americans because it highlighted Black men as the hero, rather than the entertainment or

service. However, since the images did not reject the status quo and gave credence to

stereotypical behavior, these films made little to no change to the stereotypical depictions

of Blacks (Bourne 1990, Horton et al. 1999).

Miller (1998) explains that Black male images in media after the Blaxploitation

era were presented at two extremes: criminals and drug dealers or sexually and politically

sterile. In the late 1990's the politically sterile character was a part of an effort to create

more "positive" images of Black characters, Black men were portrayed as "friendly",

"desexualized", and "nonthreatening" which became a new stereotype referred to as the

"ebony saint" (Glenn and Cunningham 2009; Hughey 2009). The ebony saint stereotype

was made especially notable with actor Sidney Poitier who was portrayed as friendly and

nonthreatening in films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *To Sir, With

Love* (1967).

Although these stereotypical images are not as prominent, the more powerful black images of characters as lawyers, doctors, saints, and gods are often accompanied with a story line where these characters supernatural powers serve in the best interests of their white counterparts (Hughey 2009). Hughey (2009) refers to these characters as the "magical negro" and suggests, "…these powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation" (p. 544). This stereotypical image of the "magical negro" subtly continues the white supremacist ideologies that further impact the social understanding of Black Americans position in society. Examples of the "magical negro" are shown in *The Green Mile* (1999) and *Family Man* (2000). In *The Green Mile* prisoner John Coffey (Black male) heals the guard, Paul Edgecombe (White male), and other inmates through the use of a mysterious gift.

Modern media stereotypes now tend to showcase men as violent and brute and women as dominant and lazy – "The Welfare Mother" (Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997). The stereotype of the Black athlete is derived from the same theory of the "savage" where Black men were seen as physically superior based on traits developed through biological and environmental factors (Hall 2002). Black children and teenagers have been stereotyped to need less care and seen as more threatening than their white counterparts (Lewis et al. 2016). Priest et al. (2018:1) explains, "experimental studies found that characteristics often associated with childhood such as innocence and need for protection are afforded to Black children less than they are to White children, and that Black children are still viewed in more dehumanizing ways than White children." The

results of this study may be a contributor to the anxiety developed Black children that causes them to fear the confirmation of this stereotype.

Stereotype Threat. A term coined by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, stereotype threat is defined as, "a predicament in which you are at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group." The authors note that, although someone is aware of the stereotype, this does not mean they believe it to be true. Stereotype threat amongst Black Americans, specifically black students, is easily activated (if they identify as Black). For example, simply mentioning race before taking a test is enough to ignite threat (Kellow and Jones 2008).

Stereotypes about individuals based on group membership persist because they are often true for some individuals. Picho and Brown (2011) explain that, in order for stereotype threat to occur, a person must believe the stereotype and have a high personal investment in the stereotyped subject. In terms of academic achievement, if a student does not generally identify with stereotypes of the racial group, can they still be successful amidst situation where they confirm the stereotype? Aronson, Fried and Good (2002) explain how stereotype threat can lead to disidentification, which is the psychological disassociation from achievement used to cope with underperforming.

Black images on television may influence viewers to conceive, alter, or reinforce opinions and beliefs about Blacks (Punyanunt-Carter 2008). This is harmful to the social understanding of Blacks in America due to general stereotypes of Black Americans as "dangerous" and "lazy" (Pimentel and Santillanes 2015; Lewis et al. 2016).

Often time media serves as "an explanation for the way individuals organize social reality and make social judgements of the world" (Punyanunt-Carter 2008:245),

scales of perceived realism and cultivation theory helped to create a baseline for the expectation that media exposure is connected to perceptions of African Americas (Punyanunt-Carter 2008). Viewers are likely to respond on the concept of race based on what they see on television.

Punyanunt-Carter (2008) examined specific perceptions of perceived realism about occupational roles, personality, low achievement, and positive stereotypes of African American portrayal on television. She found that each of these contributed to stereotypical perceptions of African Americans. Her literature acknowledges that most of the depictions had personality characteristics of "inferior, stupid, comical, immoral, and dishonest" (p.243), however, there were some stereotypes that emphasized arguably "positive" traits. The text also emphasizes that the perceived achievement level of Blacks in television was very low. They were assumed to have low socioeconomic status and lower education levels than their white counterparts.

Many scholars explain situational cues that induce stereotypes can lean many individuals to *performance avoidance* (Walton and Spencer 2009; Taylor and Walton 2011). For example, teacher calling on students in class to answer questions out loud or pop quizzes that are being administered for a grade can be seen as a situational cue that tests intelligence, thus leading students to separate from intellectual capacities out of fear of confirming stereotype.

Kellow and Jones (2008) take an interesting look into academic achievement. Unlike any of the other literature on stereotype threat, they focus on how it affects the academic achievement of high school students. This study is particularly important because adolescence, especially high school adolescence, is a time when many students

are seeking understanding about their identity and self-identify. Kellow and Jones (2008) looked at mediators of stereotype such as anxiety, perceptions of stereotype threat, achievement goals orientation, and perceptions of ability and expectancy of Black students.

Each of these variables operate under the premise of Steele's theory of stereotype threat. Steel and Aronson (1995) concluded the following:

> …making African American participants vulnerable to judgement by negative stereotypes about their group's intellectual ability depressed their standardized test performance relative to White participants, while conditions designed to alleviate this threat, improved their performance, equating the two groups once their differences in SATs were controlled (p. 808).

Although this study was able to better asses the stereotype threat amongst the students, the likelihood of controlling real life learning environments to this degree is low. Kellow and Jones (2008) use the term, "stigma consciousness, the extent to which a person expects to be stereotyped by others" (p.99).

Creamer and Orey (2017) conducted a study on the effects of stereotype threat amongst Black college students who attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). They hypothesized that students who attended an HBCU were less likely to suffer from stereotype threat because they have a background that promotes positive imagery of Black Americans. However, many of the students still suffered from stereotype threat while testing their political knowledge when faced with an all-white research group opposed to an all-black research group. This suggests that even with their strong, positive association to Black identity, they still suffer from stereotype threat.

As existing scholarship shows, the representation of Black people and students in media has potential to impact how Black students understand their identities and has real-world implications on how they are viewed by people consuming this media. My intent with this study is to address the social implications of this potential misidentification through the analysis of depictions of Black high school students in films over time. Thus I use a theoretical framework that focuses on the functions of race as a social construct and the formulation of symbolic understandings of racial groups through media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My analysis is framed in critical race and symbolic interactionist theories. Using these theoretical frameworks I am able to analyze depictions of Black high school students in film to assess how the messages in the films may potentially influence social understanding and interactions with Black students through symbolism based on their depictions.

Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Johnson-Ahorlu (2017:730), "Critical Race Theory is a set of ideas that explain what racism is, how it functions in our society, the emotional and psychological experiences of being subjected to racism, and the factors that contribute to the manifestation of racism." It is a theoretical frame that is looking to identify, analyze, and transform cultural and structural aspects of education that maintain racial, subordinate and dominant, positions in and out of the classroom (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). CRT is "committed to examining and understanding how white supremacy functions and oppresses people of color in the United States" (Goessling 2018:654). Considering the power of media narratives, historical depictions of Black Americans, and the current levels of academic achievement for African American students, this theoretical framework is applied reduce the limitations and inadequacies of traditional theoretical research methodologies by keeping communities of color at the forefront.

To apply CRT effectively, there must be majoritarian story (stories that are based on a legacy of racial privilege, where racial privilege seems "natural.") with a clear definition of racism. (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Lorde (1992) created a succinct definition of racism, which argues, "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over

all others and thereby the right to dominance." Marable (1992) developed a progressive definition of racism, "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color," (as cited in Solórzano and Yosso 2002), This definition of racism includes the experiences of all people of color and shifts away from the Black-White discourse, however, for the simplicity of this study, I will focus on the more concise definition of racism (Lorde 1992), contrasting the experiences of between Black and White high school students.

Critical Race Methodology. Critical race methodology is the application of Critical Race Theory through a "theoretically grounded approach" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002:2) . This grounded approach, "critical race methodology challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (Solorzano and Yosso 2001:2).

Critical race methodology, has five elements which include: the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination, the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and transdisciplinary knowledge (Solórzano and Yosso 2002:25-26). These themes formulate the theories basic insight and perspective. In this study I highlight the centrality of experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge is knowledge gained through experiences and this element of CRT recognizes that experience and observation of people of color, specifically Blacks, is appropriate and crucial to understanding, examining and teaching about racial subordination.

Experiential knowledge is gained through stories and experiences are not limited to face to face interactions but are drawn through other methods that express lived experiences like, storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives (Solórzano and Yosso 2002:26). This concept acknowledges that the analysis of people of color's imagery in films and television can provide the basis to how people of color are understood.

Critical race methodology challenges traditional ideals, texts and theories that accentuate deficit-informed messages that distort the experiences of people of color and alternatively stress their racialized experiences (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002:27), "critical race methodology finds that racism is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared 'normative' values and 'neutral' social scientific and educational principles and practices." Analyzing the film under this scope, I address any storytelling that draws on majoritarian stories which emphasize the notion that students of color lack the biological or social characteristics necessary for success and are culturally deprived. (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is based on three main assumptions, "(a) people strive and act toward what represents meaning for them, (b) meaning arises out of social interaction, and (c) meaning is being dealt with and modified through interpretive processes" (Handberg et al. 2015:1023). Since many participants in society engage with symbols in media, symbolic interactionism explains how the idea of race and performance is often times adhered through those engagements (Banjo 2013).

Race as a social construct is ontologically subjective, yet under the nature and grounds of knowledge surrounding it, it is objective. Cohen (2003) explains that the

development of ethnic groups is not limited to members' self-definition and understanding of their common traits and experiences but can also be formed by the categorization if outsiders. He suggests race and ethnicity are situationally defined. It is produced through a series of social interactions across the ethnic boundary in question.

These boundaries are permeable and fluctuate depending on the situations in which they occur. He also explains the theory of race is transitional. The transitions are expressed through internal and external definitions. This study focuses on the process of the external definition where "one person or set of persons defines the other(s)" (p. 60). Descriptive language and developed story lines in films define how Black students should perform.

Through symbolic interactionism I analyze racialized messages and patterns in the selected films to understand the social expectations of Black high school students. External definitions of ethnicity and race may potentially confirm others internal definitions of self. If stereotypes dominate films, the perception of different groups experiences are distorted. Symbolic interactionism explains how media influences social perceptions (Banjo 2013), and ultimately how we navigate through the world around us.

The use of these theories allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the majoritarian story through external definitions of Black students developed by symbolic interactionism as well as its counter story, which is extracted through the application of critical race theory's methodology, experiential knowledge, that tells the story of Black High school students through their lens.

LITERATURE GAPS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is designed to analyze the depiction of high school education experiences of Black students in films based on previous scholarship in symbolic interactionism, race and film theory. Based on the literature reviewed, media and film analysis on high school classroom instruction is limited. There has been research done on the implications of teachers' cultural stereotypical beliefs and the effects on the academic achievement of African American males (Lewis et al. 2016), however this study does not speak to the social and cultural context in which those beliefs are developed. With this study I plan to fill the gaps left by previous researchers to better understand the function of racial depiction (Black) and group (student) depictions in film and explore the following research questions:

RQ1:   How are Black American student identities depicted in American films?

RQ2:   Are racialized stereotypes portrayed in these films? If so, which are the most dominant?

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to address how messages syndicated in films have implications on the social understanding of Black students, their teachers, and their academic achievement. For this, I conducted a qualitative ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987) of ten films. The selected films' release dates range from late 1960's to late 2000's. Majority of the films feature diverse racial backgrounds; however, the primary focus of this analysis is on the Black students in each film.

I analyzed how Black American students are depicted in films in terms of perceived achievement level, personality/behavioral traits, socioeconomic status, and family structure. These measurements were selected based on the general stereotypes associated with Black students (Punyanunt-Carter 2008; Peguero and Williams 2011; Lewis et al. 2016). White students in the films will serve as a comparison group to gauge perceived racially suggestive portrayals.

Content Analysis. Scholars illustrate media as a form of pedagogy and emphasize its role in the construction of public belief and social action and how that translates to teaching practices that affect educational achievement and experiences (Steele 1997; Solórzano and Yosso 2001). These constructions of public belief are fueled by consistently framed media narratives.

Ethnographic content analysis can be used to uncover social blind spots or biases of the public that are constructed by writers, artists and producers who produce content with narratives based on what they know to be true or appealing (Waters et. al 2017). For the present study, a qualitative content analysis is most suitable. Qualitative content analyses uncover the messages that impact social relationships, in addition to

helping better understand how "fictional narratives about education" influence perception of real teachers and students (Gregory 2007:7).

Through this method I can identify the intentions, focus or communication of an individual, group or institution better than using numerical data. Examining how Black American students are depicted in films will gained insight to how society views different racial groups educational experience and attainment. Since films are used to encapsulate our history, reflect political and social status, and bring awareness to a multitude of racial and cultural experiences. Consequently, a content analysis is appropriate for the current study because it is one of the most commonly used methods to provide insights into cultural and historical phenomena (Macnamara 2005; Renz et. al 2018).

Film Selection. To choose the films for the current study, I completed an online search using Google focusing on key words "high school," "classroom," "education," "high school movies in the 1960's," "high school movies in the 1970's," "high school movies in the 1980's," high school movies in the 1990's," "high school movies in the 2000's," "high school movies in the 2010's". I was presented with several options for high school films. Many of the films that were dated before the 1980's featured few if any black students, which limited my selection for those decades. I also encountered limitations as I searched for films to represent each decade, because many films that were released in a certain decade were not always set or representative of that decade. I used *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) and *RottenTomatoes.com* to review plot summaries of each film and year of release.

The films chosen spanned from the late 1960's to late 2000's. This is imperative to examine the development of depictions across decades. The films selected feature

mostly dramas, but also include comedy, biographies, thriller and mixed genres, to examine the presentation of high school education depending on the targeted audiences. Since the goal of this study is to address the implication of media depictions on academic achievement, I excluded movies that focused high school "lifestyle" rather than educational practices. *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Above the Rim* (1994), and *Mean Girls* (2004) each feature high school students; however, the primary focus of these films are students in detention, a playground basketball dilemma, and navigating through the social hierarchy, rather than their classroom experiences. Using a purposive sampling approach, I selected a sample of ten films featuring educational experiences: *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *To Sir, With Love* (1967), *Halls of Anger* (1970), *Cooley High* (1975), *Lean on Me* (1989), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *High School High* (1996), *Freedom Writers* (2007), and *Precious* (2009). I accessed the films through rental, purchase and stream.

Film Descriptions. *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) is based on a novel by Bel Kaufman. This film focuses on the story of a new teacher at Calvin Coolidge High School, Sylvia Barrett. Barrett strives to make a difference in her students' lives but is constantly confronted with adversity.

To Sir, With Love (1967) tells the story of an African American male, played by Sidney Poitier, who as an unemployed engineer is hired to teach a peculiar group of reject students in East London.

Halls of Anger (1970) an inner-city school becomes integrated. The school is predominantly black, but a few white students are transferred there, and the Black students are opposed. Quincy Davis, an English teacher is transferred to the school.

Cooley High (1975) tells the story of two Chicago teens, Leroy "Preach" Jackson and Richard "Cochise" Morris. The teens are at the tail end of their high school career but get caught up in some trouble over car theft.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982) also based on a book is about California teens that are trying to figure out their way through love, school and jobs.

Lean on Me (1989) Set in Paterson, NJ, is about Joe Clark, a high school principal, who returns to Eastside High in an effort to reform the school from a drug and crime diseased school, with students failing to pass even a minimum basic skills test, into a clean, successfully performing educational establishment.

Dangerous Minds (1995) is about an ex-marine, Louanne Johnson, who recently separated from her husband is hired as a temporary teacher to a poor high school. She introduces the students to poetry and offer incentives as a way to keep the students motivated. Throughout the movies, her students deal with personal bouts that she tries to impact.

High School High (1996) a comedy loosely based on many films that have idealistic teachers who are confronted with abrupt schools and students. Richard Clark, was a former preparatory school teacher who accepted a job at an inner-city high school. Although students were resistant to his teaching methods, he was able to transform the school while finding a love interest and affording a student's way through college.

Freedom Writers (2007) Erin Gruwell, as a first-year teacher is assigned freshman English at a gang-infested high school. She used journals and field trips to learn about her students. The students grow so to Gruwell, that they request her to move along with them as they pass to the 11th and 12th grades.

Precious (2009) Clarice "Precious" Jones, an overweight, abused, illiterate teen who is pregnant with her second child is invited to enroll in an alternative school by her school teacher. The alternative school, Each One, Teach Once, is an all-girls school lead by a Ms. Rain. She uses non-traditional teaching methods to engage with the girls and learn how to help them gain literacy to eventually obtain a GED.

Coding and Measurement. While viewing I coded for measures of perceived academic achievement, socioeconomic status, personality/behavioral traits, and family composition because these are generally the areas where African Americans are stereotyped. According to scholars, Black American studies are perceived as more likely to be lower achieving than White students (Chang and Demyan 2007; Nasir et. al 2012). Punyanunt-Carter (2008:243) also acknowledges that, "African Americans on television typically had lower status roles and were depicted as having lower educational levels than whites." As for personality and behavior, many scholars (Chang and Demyan 2007; Crowell, Woodson, and Rashid 2013; Lewis et al. 2016) project African American males to have more behavior problems and are perceived as dangerous. It is also assumed that many come from single parent homes and have minimal parental involvement.

I coded each film according to interactions and discussions between Black students and their, peers, teachers, parents and other characters they interact with. I mostly focus on leading characters and stereotypical traits regarding "culture and intelligence, language and capability" (Solórzano and Yosso 2001:2). I coded the following variables:

Perceived academic achievement level- indicators include ability to read, discussions about test grades, performance on classwork, achievements and awards presented.

Behavioral traits- indicators include humor, aggression/fighting, threatening peers, family members and school faculty/staff, mention of detention and/or suspension, perceived laziness, lateness, and athleticism.

Socioeconomic status- indicators include housing and parents' achievement level

Family composition and involvement- indicators include mention of parental involvement or status i.e. mother and/or father and/or guardian imprisoned, deceased, or estranged.

I also used the following codes to identify the students:

Character Name- indicated by name mentioned in the film.

Character Sex- indicated by the physical characteristics of the characters. This analysis does not account for self-identified gendering. It focuses solely on male and female sex identity.

Character Race- indicated by the skin color of the characters.

I use critical race methodology as the overall framework for my analysis. I reviewed each film three times to determine the details of these variables. The first viewing was an overview. Following Moran (2015), for the second and third viewing I took detailed notes on the actions and interactions of the Black students in the films scene by scene to match patterns with the pre-determined themes (open coding). Inductive subcategories, including behavioral traits and family composition and involvement, were established after the second and third viewing. During these reviews I asked: Are the Black students depicted in a way that shows subordinate to the white students? What are the conversations about the Black students' family finances? Are there consistent differences with how Black and White students are treated by their teachers? Are the

Black students (male and female) given different responsibilities in the classroom than their White counterparts? How often did I see racial stereotypes that were identifiable to the literature I read? These questions helped determine the position of my analysis and ultimate the formatting of my finding.

I also coded the arrangement of the settings and music used in each film. Films featuring schools with a lot of graffiti and abused amenities versus better maintained schoolhouses. I also coded for the use of Rap and Hip-Hop music in films. I focused specifically on lyrics that referenced violence, financial struggle and incomplete family structure. Following this coding, I entered my notes into Nvivo to run a word frequency query to identify any themes that may submerge within the data. Nvivo is a qualitative data analysis software that organizes, analyzes and finds insight in unstructured qualitative data. Based on the information found in the films, I organized the data based on patterns that comply with determined themes.

IV. FINDINGS

My results are sectioned into four thematic categories and subcategories based on the what was revealed in the content analysis. In the first section, I found that the films represented consistent racialized characteristics for Black students in regard to their behavior, family composition, appearance and academic achievement. Second, films portray Black students as challenging. Considering external circumstances, Black students needed considerably more mental, physical and emotional support from their teachers in order to succeed academically. Third, the films highlighted how Black students defined and understood themselves. Lastly, Black students are portrayed as receptive to culturally responsive teaching methods.

Each of these findings were discovered through the application of critical race methodology and a focus on experiential knowledge. By viewing these experiences through the lens of the Black students in the films, rather than assessing the majoritarian overview of the film I was able to identify racial inequities and better understand the social contexts that create those inequities.

Racialized Stereotypes

Films generally frame the narrative of the characters depicted with tailored language and tone to speak to the intended audience. In the selected films, many racialized stereotypes were confirmed. Historical stereotypes of Blacks such as "sambos", "savage", "mammies" "jezebels" and "picaninny" were not overtly present in the films analyzed. More modern stereotypes that share similar characteristics like the unintelligent black student, black athletes, drug dealing, criminality, and helpless children and teenagers were more frequent in the films' storylines. Through the lens of symbolic

interactionism I found that many of these stereotypes were a result of self-fulfilling prophecies based on the beliefs of their communities.

The Athlete. This stereotype appears in 3 out of 10 movies. In *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* (1982), Charles 'Jefferson' was a football star. He and his younger brother were the only Black students with speaking parts in the film. When Jefferson pulled into the parking lot, Mike Damone, a smooth-talking gambler, told two other students the story of how Jefferson received his car from some alumni his sophomore year for playing football. Here we can see how Black students are rewarded for athletic ability. The film did not showcase any of Jefferson's experiences in the classroom. Jefferson is portrayed as intimidating. When he pulled into the school parking lot, Mike commented on his car and his response was "don't fuck with it". He is tall, muscular and wears an uninviting demeanor that cause After Spicoli, the school's stoned surfer, staged a car wreck by the opposing team, Lincoln, Charles was outraged. During the games he was a savage. He made countless tackles and shocked one of the opposing player into a spasm. This scene is consistent with the basis of athlete stereotype which claims Black people are genetically superior through environmental evolution for athletics (Hall 2002).

In *Cooley High* (1975), Cochise was basketball player. He was admired by his peers and the women. After skipping school and spending time in the city, they stopped in a park on their way back to school and see young boys playing basketball. Cochise grabbed the ball and said, "let me show you how it's done." Preach said, "that's how my boy is going to do at Grambling [University] next year." They ran into a classmate who gave them the news about an upcoming exam:

> Dorothy: Tyrone wasn't in history and since y'all missed Mr. Mason's

class he moved the midterm up from Friday to Monday.

Preach: And you dummies thought you had a week to study.

Cochise: Monday? That blows our whole weekend.

Willie: Oh man, I gotta go back and get my history book.

Cochise: Aye, Willie, get mine too.

Willie: What's wrong with your legs?

Cochise: Ah get the book.

Preach: Man you the star. You ain't got to worry about your grades.

Cochise was admired for his athletic ability and he was given opportunities attend college based on his athletics. Because of his athletic ability, his peers assumed he doesn't have to focus on his academics as intensely because he already had opportunities.

In *Lean on Me* (1989) Maria, a Latino student complained to Mr. Clark that they felt ignored. Every extracurricular activity was for the Blacks, including basketball and football. Maria's comment implies that the Blacks outnumber any other race in sports. This stereotype was particular to Black male students. Maria's comments imply that the idea of race and athletics are almost synonymous.

Unintelligent. The stereotype of the unintelligent Black student was present in 7 of the 10 films reviewed. In these films, intelligence is understood to be synonymous with white people. For example, in *Halls of Anger* (1970) J.T., Carter and Lloyd patronize Aislan by asking him to move from his seat so they could sit next to a brother. When Mr. Davis walks in and sees Aislan out of his seat he asks why he is standing and Aislan's response was he forgot. J.T. then says, "and I thought you honkeys supposed to be so smart." In *Lean on* Me (1989), as Mr. Clark gave a motivational speech to the

students before their Basic Skills exams, he explained what people outside of the school said about the students of Eastside High:

> Mr. Clark: I want to tell you what the people out there are saying about you and what they think about your chances. They say you're inferior. You are just a bunch of niggers and spic and poor white trash. Education is wasted on you. You cannot learn.

In addition to broadcasting the social and communal understanding of unintelligence of Black students, this also shows that class as well as race is an important factor in the determination of intelligence with Mr. Clark's reference of "poor white trash". In addition to being portrayed as substandard on intelligence, Black students were portrayed as academically underachieving. Many of the Black students were resistant to learning new material and made jokes when they were placed in situations where they felt intellectually inferior. In *Lean on Me* (1989) students were taking their practice exam. During the exam they were blowing spit balls at each other and seemed anxious and confused. The students were tapping their pencils and laying their heads down. Clarence was caught looking a bikini magazine. The camera cuts to the exam of a Black female student and it says:

> *For Questions 1-5, choose the word that means the same as the underlined word in the sentence.* The first question said: *Each morning Bernard has his customary breakfast of oatmeal, toast and juice.*
>
>   *a. Fancy*
>
>   *b. Special*

c. *Usual*

d. *Strange*

The student chooses strange. Similarly, In *Precious* (2009), Precious must take a series of
assessments to be properly placed in programs at Each One Teach One. Precious is
shown in a classroom with an exam. She takes a deep breath, taps her pencil and looks
around the empty room anxiously. A small portion of the test question shows and
precious circles an answer, then erases it in uncertainty:

Precious (V.O.):   Its always something wrong with these tests. These
tests paint a picture of me with no brain. These tests
paint a picture of me and my mother, my whole
family, as less than dumb. Just ugly black grease to
be wiped away, find another job for.

This scene embodies the concept of stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995)
through Precious' anxiety to complete the test. This scene shows that Precious is
cognizant of her personal academic ability and her race. Precious also acknowledges the
social implication surrounding both of them. She acknowledges that her performance on
this test will be representative of her as a Black student and could lead to the
personification of her and her [Black] family being perceived as "less than dumb".

In *Halls of Anger* (1970) Mr. Davis asked the students to read. The first reader is a
Black student who struggles to pronounce words and read fluidly. Next is Mae, a Black
female student. She also struggles to read. Next Johnson is asked to read, he jokingly
says, "so far this is one hell of a story." He is a comedic relief in this situation;
acknowledging that his classmates are struggling to read. When he begins he also

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struggles, but uses comedy to lighten the mood. Next, Doug is asked to read and reads the passage fluidly. He pronounces each word accurately and without hesitation as opposed to the Black students who read previously. As he reads the Black students who read look around with annoyance. Mae rolls her eyes. Johnson squints to look at the passage in confusion and Mr. Davis covers his face in embarrassment. The other Black students in the class also share the look of embarrassment. This scene is consistent with critical race theory (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), specifically its assertion that media and film consistently establish racial, subordinates and dominance in the classroom. By using experiential knowledge, you can see that the Black students do care about their educational achievement based on the look of embarrassment. This messaging counters the overarching narrative that could be interpreted as dismissive, rather than ashamed. The Black students in this scene a are consistently shown as unintelligent and/or illiterate, which is a stereotype undeviating from the social understanding of Black people.

In *High School High* (1996), as Mr. Clark prepares the student for the Academic Proficiency Test, he tells them about the book they will be using to prepare and walks them through simply opening the book, where the class says in unison, "oooh". *High School High* is a comedy spoof of previous education films released and shows an exaggerated portrayal of unintelligence. The scene is showing the students learning to open a book for the first time. In these instances, the theory of symbolic interactionism is applicable because many of the Black students in the film cower and/ or resist academic performances due to preconceived notions about their race and intelligence. This idea of unintelligence is a symbolic of the students perceived placement in society.

Inversely, I found that some White students are also portrayed as unintelligent, yet

the messaging surrounding their competence differs. In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), following an exam, Mr. Hand passes out numerous average to failing grades. He says, "three weeks we've been talking about the Platt Amendment – What are you people, on dope?" His tone and language imply that he believes the students are mentally capable of learning and understanding this level of material in three weeks, so the only explanation for their failure must me drugs. This interaction between Mr. Hand (teacher) and Jeff Spicoli (White student) implies that intelligence for him should be the norm. In contract to depictions of lack of intelligence for black students, unintelligent depictions of white students were present in only 2 films. Although the [white] students in *To Sir With Love* (1967) were depicted as rebellious and unruly, their intelligence, or lack thereof, was not scrutinized.

Family Dynamics. In addition to the direct racialized stereotypes of black students, indirect stereotyping of black students' family composition was also revealed in these films. Many Black students were reared in environments where crime, poverty and abuse were prevalent. Familial influence is prevalent because most school-aged students are dependent on their family for support. In reviewing these films I found that many parents of Black students were all facing issues that ultimately affected the students school behavior. Whether unsupportive, abusive, on welfare, dead, or in jail; in each of the films Black students had to deal with issues of family conflict that transpired into their academic development.

Some Black students were discouraged to continue their education because their parents did not value the material they were being taught or they did not see how it would benefit their circumstances. These students in impoverished neighborhoods need money

to survive, so that is how their parents prioritized their lives. In *Dangerous Minds* (1995), Ms. Johnson visits Durrell and Lionel's home to encourage them to get back in school. When she arrived she was greeted by their mother who explained to her that her boys would not be back in her school because graduating was not in their future. She believed Ms. Johnson was messing with their minds and teaching them material (e.g. "poetry and shit") that was a waste of time since she wasn't raising "doctors and lawyers" and that bills were their priority. This scene addresses the context surrounding there is

In *Precious* (2009), following Precious' suspension, Ms. Lichenstein came to Precious' home to give her another option to pursue her education and explain the details of an alternative school, Each One Teach One. During this conversation Precious' mother, Mary, told Precious to get rid of Ms. Lichenstein:

> Mary: School ain't gon help none. Take your ass down to the welfare.
>
> Who the fuck she think she is. So I guess you think you cute now,
> right?
>
> Ole' ugly bitch. You shoulda kept your fuckin mouth shut. Just
> cause he gon give you more children than he give me you think
> you something fuckin special? Fuck you and fuck him.
>
> _
>
> So you gon send some white bitch to my mother fuckin buzzer
> talkin' about some higher education. You're a dummy bitch. You
> will never know shit.

Welfare. Of the 10 films analyzed in this study, the depiction of Black students on welfare were mostly students of single-female households. Mary Jones (*Precious*) was

the lazy, unemployed, abusive mother of Precious. She discouraged all behavior that could cause her to lose her benefits. Her welfare dependency forced Precious to lie about her home life and forego opportunities for academic and social growth. In order to continue receiving support, Precious' daughter is brought over to Precious and Mary's home by her grandmother when the social worker comes. Mary deceives the social worker when she asks about her employment status and how she is caring for Precious' daughter, Mongo.

During a town meeting, Mr. Clark (*Lean on Me*) is addressed by the parents of the students after dismissing the trouble makers. In the meeting he explains that the parents can be more helpful in their students pursuit of academic success by sitting down and making sure their kids study and getting the families off welfare. In *Cooley High* (1975)*, Cochise runs home and walks in on a conversation with his mother and cousin. In this conversation it is disclosed that his mother is on welfare and in need of extra money:

> Melba: Come on Jimmy Lee. If you can afford them fancy rings and clothes, then you can give me some money. You know these welfare checks ain't enough to live on.
>
> Jimmy Lee: Oh, Aunt Melba. Now I need these clothes to work in.
>
> Melba: You ain't never done a day's work in your life.

Neglected Teenagers. Though Black students were depicted to share the same amount of responsibility as White students in terms of jobs and extracurriculars, Black students were portrayed as neglected at a greater rate than their counterparts. In films that featured predominately White students (*To Sir, With Love; Fast Times at Ridgemont* High) it was communicated that students were left unattended (e.g. parents away for the weekend),

opposed to the abandonment illustrated for the Black students. The films also show that Black students who have a parent who is abusive, incarcerated or dead have a more difficult time coping because they are usually only raised by one parent (*To Sir, With Love; Lean on Me; Freedom Writers; Precious*)

In *Lean on Me*, Kaneesha was found sobbing outside of the office, Mr. Clark come to console her and figure out what is wrong. She communicates that her grades are not good and she has no place to live and her mother did not want her any more. On a visit to Kaneesha's home, Mr. Clark and Ms. Levias learn that Kaneesha's mother has "ruined her life". She hates the woman that she has become and she does not want Kaneesha to see her like that.

The films also showed that not all negligence was negative. In the films (*Cooley High; High School High*), their parents worked late nights and multiple jobs. For example, in the film *Cooley High* (1975) Preach is a product of a single parent (mother) home. When he gets home from school his mom is headed out hurried for work. Following his two incidents [sneaking Brenda into his bedroom and being arrested], which he was able to do because of lack of supervision, his mother comes home and confronts him about his infractions. She says,"you know I've got three jobs and I've got to trust somebody." She threatens to beat him and tells him to go get the belt. She whimpers "I'm tired. I ain't doin' it anymore. I'm tired." Griff (*High School High*) explained that he was the one to watch his little brothers and sisters while his mom was working, he's all they have. These examples are consistent with Priest et al. (2018) and Lewis et al. (2016) studies that gives credence to the stereotype of neglected teens by explaining the belief that Black students are less innocent and require less need protection

than the white students.

Loss or displacement of parent(s) from death or incarceration gave understanding of how grief can impact students focus, engagement and enthusiasm about their studies. In two films (*To Sir, With Love; Lean on Me*) two students were dealing with the loss of a parent in different ways. Seales (*To Sir, With Love*) was very quiet. He did not speak out of turn in class and was barely shown in scenes with the entire class. While Seales is standing outside smoking a cigarette he explains to Sir that his mother is "awful" sick. He communicates that Sir is like his old man, and that he hates the "rotten bastard". In this scene he is very angry. He does not provide much context on what his father did for him to feel so intensely about his father. Later,

Thomas "Sams" from *Lean on Me* (1989) was very rowdy. Sams was one of the students sent to the main stage in the auditorium and dismissed after Mr. Clark requested lists of the school's trouble makers from the teachers. He smokes crack and skips class. Following his dismissal he comes back to Mr. Clark to ask to be let back in because he could not tell his mother he got kicked out. When asked about his father, Sams told Mr. Clark that his father did not live with them anymore. He looked sad and ashamed when he shared this information with Mr. Clark.

In *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), Ms. Barrett passes out Delaney cards[3] to her homeroom class. One Black female student raises her hand and says, "for parents' name can I use my aunt?" Also, during parent teacher conference night, Roy comes with his guardian Mrs. Lewes. She explains to Ms. Barrett that she is not Roy's mother and that he has had ten mothers between her and his birth mother. He lies with them on their sofa and bounces from neighbor to neighbor. These examples are significant to this study

because they show the consistent messages surrounding Black family structure. From female headed single parent homes, to orphaned teenagers, Black students are portrayed to have lacking support, which often times puts the responsibility of their success in their teachers hands.

Challenges Created for Teachers and Educators

In 8 of the 10 films many of the Black students came from homes with low incomes, estranged parents, drug and gang ridden neighborhoods, and these issues made it particularly difficult for students to be mentally and physically present. Much of their minds seemed to be preoccupied with the events beyond the walls of the classrooms and they were displayed a disinterest in the instruction given by the teachers, initially. From this, all of the educators in the films took the extra step to ensure the success of the Black students. Many teachers in the films did not know how to approach or teach their Black students and they looked to literature (*Dangerous Minds; Freedom Writers; High School High*) to draw inspiration for teaching methods. Educators had to go far beyond their usual plan with no assurance of the success of their Black students.

Throughout the film *Cooley High* (1975), Preach, Cochise, and other students were involved in mischief. They skipped school, swindled hookers and stole food. When Preach, Cochise, Stone and Robert were arrested for grand theft auto. Mr. Mason went down to the police station to reason with the officers. He explained that the boys are good kids and even made his aware of their recent achievements. Mr. Mason say, "Richard [Cochise] Morrison just got a scholarship to college. Now you don't want him to lose that over a simple joyride?" Despite this information, the police officer still thinks they need to be taught a lesson. Mr. Mason asks is it worth ruining their lives? The police officer

decides to release Preach and Cochise. He even tries to get Stone and Robert's charges changed.

In addition to jail bailout, many students, particularly the Black female students were dealing with familial issues like pregnancy that warranted house calls from the teachers. Callie (*Dangerous Minds)* Kaneesha *(Lean on Me)* and Precious *(Precious)* were all pregnant. Callie was one of the brightest students in the class. She was praised by Ms. Johnson for her academic ability. After she was notified of her pregnancy, she was encouraged to attend Clearview, an alternative school for expecting teenage mothers. Ms. Johnson believed this school would not give her the opportunities she deserved because of the limited curricula. She went to her home to explain her potential. After other trying circumstances and the death of Emilio, the class ring leader and trouble maker, Ms. Johnson decided to leave the school. Callie returns to school and explains that this is her last chance to make something of herself and she needed Ms. Johnson to stay.

In *Precious* (2009) following the birth of her baby, she returned home to her abusive mother. Prior to her delivery, Precious confessed everything about her parents' physical and sexual abuse to her social worker, Ms. Weiss. Because of that, Mary was kicked off welfare and blamed Precious. She attacked her and threw a television down the staircase attempting to hit Precious. Precious escapes to Each One Teach One, an alternative school, where she is found by Ms. Rain:

Precious (V.O.):   I could tell by Ms. Rain's face, I ain't gon' be
                     homeless no more. I just don't know where imma
                     end up though. I feel bad for her. She just a ABC
                     teacher. She ain't no social worker –but she all I

could think of.

These characters are shown as helpless and neglected and throughout the films teachers take tremendous care for the students' success. Living in these environments, these students resist and retract from anything pressing that could add more stress to their lives.

Two films (*To Sir With Love; Fast Times At Ridgemont High)* featured troublesome White students who also benefited from extended efforts from teachers. In *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* (1982)*,* Mr. Hand continuously expressed to the students that class time was his time and not to be wasted with the students' antics. Jeff 'Spicoli' was continuously late or skipped his class, ate in his classroom and was often disruptive. At the end of the film when the students were preparing for the graduation dance, Mr. Hand shows up to Spicoli's house and communicates that he wasted 8 hours of his time this term. To compensate for that he came to his home to get his 8 hours back teaching him U.S. History. At the end of their time, Spicoli successfully explains the founding of America and Mr. Hand lets him know that he may "squeak" by with a passing grade for the course.

In *To Sir, With Love* (1967)*,* Sir has expressed to the class his disgust for their behavior, dress and constant use of profanity. He convinces the principal that the students need a trip to the museum for an opportunity to gain cultural insight. On the day of the students show up to class polished and calm. The students were grateful that Sir was willing to go through the trouble of giving them an opportunity like this. Many other teachers did not see them as respectable and did not care to take the extra steps to encourage their growth. Although these presentations of White students as challenging or burdensome did occur, it was a rarity in comparison to the representations of Black

students.

Students need stability to maintain a healthy academic career. Black students in 9/10 films were depicted to have unstable turbulent lives that caused them to give up on their education. The teachers in these films were faced with far greater challenges than teachers in other films (*To Sir With Love; Fast Times At Ridgemont High)*.

Black Students Defined

In the films I analyzed, there was an implied standard associated with being Black based on conversations among the characters. This standard would be considered a majoritarian story based on the messages of inferiority, limitations and lack of intelligence permeated the storylines. Using experiential knowledge (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) to understand the framing of the way Black students defined themselves, we can see how embedded stories based on a legacy of racial privilege influence how the Black students in the films define themselves.

Some students in the films originally accepted those stories as fact, but pressed past it later on, while others expressed opposition to that standard immediately. For instance, Jerry in *Up the Down Staircase* raises his hand to explain the story of Macbeth by William Shakespeare after listening to his classmates tell a series of anecdotes about what was happening in the story:

> Jerry: Um, can't some people love and hate at the same time Ms.
>   Barrett? Aside from ambition, isn't that how Macbeth,
>   Lady Macbeth destroyed themselves and each other?
>
> Ms. Barrett: Jerry, that was a very interesting point you made and uh,
>   we'll talk more about it next time.

When Jerry leaves the classroom, a black girl that is standing in the hallway angrily says to him, "you whitey loving plow boy". Jerry expresses himself eloquently and readily engages with the teacher. From that it is implied that Jerry's actions are against the understanding of Black tolerance for White people. So much so that he is taunted for it by another Black student.

According to Okeke et al. (2009), "academic self-concept is posited in motivational theories to enhance future performance because the individual's belief in his or her competence leads to greater persistence in the face of failure and greater effort expenditure on difficult tasks." How students identify themselves ultimately determines how they define their abilities and opportunities. Based on conversations in the films, there is an implied standard associated with being Black. In *Freedom Writers* (2007), following a conversation about the violence, struggles of living in their neighborhood, and oppressive experiences with White people, Marcus and Andre explain why Mrs. G's efforts are not useful for them:

Marcus: Lady, stop actin' like you trynna understand our situation. And just do your lil' baby sittin' up there.

Mrs. G: That's all you think this is?

Marcus: It ain't nothin' else. When I look out in the world I don't see nobody that looks like me with they pockets full unless they rappin' a lyric or dribblin' a ball. So what else you got in here for me

Mrs. G: And what if you can't rap a lyric or dribble a ball?

Andre: It ain't this. I know that much [school]

Marcus: Damn right.

Black students believed they would not have many opportunities. They saw themselves only as blue collar workers or in jail. In a scene where Mr. Davis (*Halls of Anger*) asked Johnson to see him after class to work on his reading. Johnson told Mr. Davis he had to be to work by 5 to clean air conditioning ducts Downtown. When Mr. Davis asks Johnson if that's what he wants to do, Johnson says, "if you white you right, if your brown hang around but if you black get back. That's where it's at." Eddie (*Up the Down Staircase*) expresses his discontent for white people multiple times throughout the film. As he becomes more engaged in class, he tells Ms. Barrett he will be dropping out. Ms. Barrett asks why and communicates that if money is his concern they can work it out because this was important. He could get a better job, not just an ordinary job if he stuck it out with his education. Eddie responds, "my brother stuck it out here [school]. He went up for that better job…he went up for that ordinary job also. The very next day, some whities had both jobs. I just won't be them." He is convinced that his job opportunities are limited due to society's standards for races.

Some of the characters expressed opposition to that standard and communicated aspirations to grow beyond it. Some students intrinsically possessed characteristics that deviated from the implied standard of blackness (e.g. low income, blue collar workers, unintelligible), yet they dissociate themselves from their natural habit in order to conform to the standard of their peers.

In *Cooley High* (1975) Preach has aspirations of becoming a writer, despite his lack of application in the classroom. His friends patronize him as if his dreams are unrealistic based on their environment. After Cochise shares the news of his scholarship

and excitement for college with his friends, Preach Pooter, and Tyrone while heading to a party. They playfully nudge Preach to the point where he almost tips over and he shouts out "yall gon' make me drop the wine." Pooter and Tyrone elude to the fact that this his outburst was not really about the wine, but instead about not going anywhere [college]:

> Preach: Aw man, as soon as he gets out I'm off like a big black bird to Hollywood. I'm gon be a famous writer, man.
>
> Pooter: Aw nigga, your ass ain't goin' no place but to jail.
>
> Preach: Oh, how you know?
>
> Pooter: What kind of script is gonna come from something like this? [referring to their environment] Then all of a sudden he's gonna be a big time Hollywood writer? You crazy.
>
> Preach: Yea, you can call me crazy when I come back with my first million

The boys read aloud and mock Preach's poetry. They take poems from his notebook and laugh and joke at them:

> Preach: You guys think it's so funny because I wanna be something beside a factory worker or a football player. Well that's because you're a bunch of stupid niggers that don't know shit.

At this point Preach is mad and the other boys waves him off like he is over reacting. Pooter looks really offended by his statement. This film demonstrates that thoughts like Preach's are uncommon in their environment and Pooter and Tyrone are there to bring him back to reality. To them dreams like Preach's are "crazy" and Preach

responds that he can desire to be more than just a factory worker or a football player despite his circumstances. In *High School High*, Mr. Clark asks Griff if he has a dream. Griff responds and say he wouldn't be interested. Griff revealed to Mr. Clark that he wanted to go to college. He made Mr. Clark promise not to tell anyone. It is implied in this scene that Griff does not want his aspirations for college to be revealed to anyone because it goes against his current reputation as a hard body, bad boy.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is a method of instruction that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings 1994). Research shows empathetic tactics can improve students' overall educational attainment, helping to gain a sense of inclusiveness and diminishing anxiety over academic success. Modifying curriculum and instructional strategies creates a more cohesive learning environment, ultimately decreasing marginalization of ethnically diverse students. Literature suggests that empathy in culturally responsive interactions, specifically between Black students and their teachers', builds trust and classroom community resulting in increased class participation in addition to instructional risk taking and flexibility and cultural competency (Coffey and Farinde-Wu 2016; Warren 2013).

Nine of the ten films used a process of culturally responsive teaching and relatability to make the digestion of information easier for students. Following an assessment by the State Board to assess achievement levels, Mr. Davis (*Halls of Anger*) students were a little stumped by their inability to answer. Mr. Davis then did a rapid fire assessment for the Black students using terminology that was relatable to them like,

"lowrider" and "going into a nod". The students were actively engaged and defined each of the word correctly. In the film, Mr. Davis also highlighted students not only related to racially culturally responsive teaching, but also age (teenage). Johnson struggled with his reading throughout the film. When he was given erotica by Mr. Davis he was enthusiastic about the material. He would smirk and laugh as he read the story. Initially, from discomfort, later from interest in the stories.

In *High School High,* as the students are preparing for the Academic Proficiency Test, Mr. Clark uses terminology and analogies that the students would recognize:

> Mr. Clark: You and three of your G's are on someone else's turf. You're cruising along in your fly ride about 20 miles per. There's a posse of eight homies just sitting in front of their crib, they're just chilling on the porch. Playing some fresh jams.
>
> Anferny: Who they got on the box?
>
> Mr. Clark: I think they're riffing with Tag Team, maybe some Ice, Snoop, Biggie, Junior MAFIA, whatever.
> They decide that they want to throw down. So, you and your boys, you pile out of the hooptie for the face-off. They have six baseball bats and two chains. You have three brass knuckles and two sawed off pool cues, you know, jimmy sticks. Now, what I want to know is what is the ratio of metal weapons to wooden ones?

The class all excitedly raise their hands to answer the question. They are shown to be

thinking clearly and without anxiety or hesitation. Black students appreciated culturally responsive practices because they were able to establish their identities as students within the practices.

Mrs. G (*Freedom Writers*) believes the story of Anne Frank would be relevant to the students based on the similarities in their environments. After Eva discovers Anne Frank dies in the book, she is furious with Mrs. G for recommending the book to them, because of what it says about her. Marcus communicates to her that this book is great for students like them because they deal with friends' deaths every day and they never got to tell their story. This story helps the students find their identity in their work. They are able to associate themselves to something or someone greater than their neighborhood.

Precious, Joanne, and Rhonda (*Precious)* use Ms. Rain's journals to help them tell the stories of their lives. From fairytales to true stories of dealing with HIV. Precious learned to express herself through her journal and found a voice that once did not exist. Ms. Rain (*Precious*) asked each of the girls to go around the room and introduce themselves by stating their name, where they were born, their favorite color, something they do well, and why they were at the alternative school. Initially, Precious wanted to skip the introduction, but after hearing the rest of her classmates Precious had time to reflect and decided to introduce herself. Precious mentions that she has never spoken in class before. Ms. Rain then responded "Well how does that make you feel?" Precious responds, "Here," with a look of shame. After seeing Precious' face, Ms. Rain immediately tells the girls to take out their journals and write about anything, such as their feelings, and their home life. Ms. Rain's reaction to Precious' response was a direct result of culturally responsive teaching (Warren 2013). She notices that this reaction

warranted more understanding and Precious' lack of participation in the past would

suggest she had some disconnection with the material.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess cinematic messaging about Black high school students to see if racialized stereotypes were persistent in the films despite social messaging that communicates a "post racial society". Are Black students depicted as inferior or less intelligent than their White counterparts? Are Black students' identities diverse? How have films' depictions of Black students evolved over the past 50 years? Education is a foundational element to our society and how the world interprets the educational experiences of people of color, particularly Black students, ultimately affects their outcome (Steele and Aronson 1995).

Overall, I found that Black students in films were consistently depicted under the scope of racialized stereotypes. Over time, 1967-2009, I found that the Black students in these ten films were replicas of modernized stereotypes like, unintelligent, athletes, neglected, and products of welfare-ridden families. Black students in these ten films were also seen as burdensome or challenging. Black students' portrayed lifestyles caused many of them to be disengaged from their academic and created exhausting situation for their teachers to ensure their success. I also found that the lifestyles of the Black students in these films also contributed to their understanding of themselves. Many of them defined themselves based on the messages of inferiority, social standards about the Black race, and lack community opportunities.

These messages and community circumstances shaped how Black students in the films acquired knowledge. Many of them had limited knowledge of worlds outside of their own, thus their culture and community was how they learned their values and what to communicate. From this, I found that the Black students in the films were particularly

responsive to culturally responsive teaching methods by their teachers. The students in the films felt empowered when teachers used terminology or explained stories that were directly relatable to their culture.

These findings explicitly portray White dominance over Black students when viewed under the scope of Critical Race Theory. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2001), "it is within the context of racism that "monovocal" stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told. Unacknowledged White privilege helps maintain racism's stories. As such, we are defining White privilege as a system of opportunities and benefits conferred upon people simply because they are White" (pp. 27). Focusing on the experiential knowledge of the Black students allowed me to uncover the oppressive messages that otherwise would be normalized.

Particularly, racialized stereotypes of Black students and their perceived intelligence was contrasting to normative discoveries. For instance in *Halls of Anger* (1970) Johnson struggled to read and made numerous comments on the social structure and the understanding as Blacks as the subordinate race (i.e. "if you white you right, if your brown hang around but if you black get back"). This narrative is symbolic of the thought process that many Black students within the films share based on circumstance.

Also the depiction of Black male students as hyper athletic were fueled by symbolic interactions in the films. For instance, Coochise (*Cooley High*) was the star basketball player, because of this status, women treated him with more respect and willingness than other women treated his peers. His status as an athlete also made his friends assure him that he did not need to worry about his grades. This is consistent with the theory of symbolic interactionism because Cochise's status as an athlete was a

symbol of exception. These actions by Cochise's peers and teachers develop athleticism as a symbol of elitism and exceptionalism.

Through the analysis of these films my findings suggest that racial stereotypes are widespread in the media. Movies are a basis for many as to what we as a society accept. We are socialized through the images in films and television because they resonate with us emotionally.

The familiarity and standard is what continues the perpetuation of storylines and racialized depictions. As the stories evolved and the language around race changed, the messaging around Black high school students has remained the same. Depictions of Black high school students in these films align closely with several historical and modern negative stereotypes surrounding Black people as a race and within education. Since this was a comparative study, I found that the stereotyping of White students was also evident. In films like *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* (1982), students were stereotyped to be hormone raged, irresponsible teenagers, however, inversely the intellectual and social status of these students were not scrutinized like those of Black students (*Halls of Anger; Lean on Me; Freedom Writers*).

Media narratives about the family dynamics of Black students contribute to the social understanding of how they are raised and ultimately their values and opportunities. Depictions of welfare ridden neglected teens make teachers and educators more susceptible to view them as such in real time as reflected in Lewis et al.'s (2016) study. These narratives also contribute to the experiential knowledge that people gain about Black students. Following Critical Race Methodology, these images may contribute to the conditioning, through narrative, thus further establishing the distorted understanding

of how to educate Black students.

Studies indicate that many minority students become disengaged from schooling, as it socializes students within the realms of the dominant racial group. The development of the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) acknowledges that our school systems have been dismissive to the emotional needs of diverse student groups (Ladson-Billings 1994). Research shows empathetic tactics can improve students' overall educational attainment, helping to gain since of inclusiveness and diminishing anxiety over academic success. Modifying curriculum and instructional strategies creates a more cohesive learning environment, ultimately decreasing marginalization of ethnically diverse students. Literature suggests that empathy in culturally responsive interactions, specifically between Black students and their teachers', builds trust and classroom community resulting in increased class participation in addition to instructional risk taking and flexibility and cultural competency (Coffey and Farinde-Wu 2016; Warren 2013).

The films analyzed in this study highlight the use of culturally responsive learning environments for the progression of Black high school students. Many of the students were portrayed as rebellious at the beginning of the stories. They were depicted as unengaged and did not see the value of learning certain material because of the racial precedents that existed. After teachers engaged the students in a manner that was relatable to them, students became more inclined to pursue performance goals (Kellow and Jones 2008). Although demonstrating that culturally responsive teaching is generally positive, these depictions are still highly stereotyped in that it they diminish Black students real life enthusiasm for academics and limited them to learning practices that

were native to them.

More often, the Black students in the films vocalize the most appreciation for their educators (*Cooley High; Lean on Me; Dangerous Minds; High School High; Freedom Writers; Precious*). Their gratitude is seen as a release of academic anxiety. The existence of this anxiety is a result of standardization. The curriculums, cultures and knowledge basis that were established earlier in their academic careers did not include their perspective, thus their experiences were suppressed and they were sorted based on achievement.

Black students in these films expressed a lot of discontent for White people and allowed their understanding of themselves as Black people inhibit their growth despite the exemplified mental capacity (J.T. Watson *Halls of Anger*). Steel and Aronson (1995:797-798) explain, "after a lifetime of exposure to society's negative images of their ability, these students are likely to internalize an "inferiority anxiety"– a state that can be aroused by a variety of race-related cues in the environment.

Some limitations to this research were in the methodology. Generally, films before 1970 did not feature many Black actors. Specifically Black female actors. The films used in this study disproportionately showcased the experiences of Black female high school students. Most films only had one Black female student with a story line, thus minimal information was extracted from the data.

Films that feature classroom educational experiences of Black students before the 1960's were not accessible. Broadening the scope of this research by analyzing films from the early 1910s and 1920's where these historical stereotypes were more prominent would allow a greater opportunity to assess the development over time. This study only

included mainstream films, which limited the interpretation of Black students to the standard of mass producing movie industries. The inclusion of independent films with a similar study will broaden the understanding of Black high school students' education experiences on a micro level. While this study is able to show how Black students are depicted, it cannot show the effects of these depictions. A future study could be designed to examine how media depictions of Black students effects viewers.

This particular study sheds light on not only the influence of narrative in media but also the consistency of stereotyping within our culture. As previously stated, media as one of our most dominant sources has the ability to educate and connect different cultures by offering valid, realistic depictions of inaccessible groups. This content analysis is a leadoff to future studies about the depiction of Black Students in film and media. This study contributes to the discipline of sociology in areas of education, media effects, race and family structure.

END NOTES

1. Minstrel shows- American theatrical form popular in the early 19ᵗʰ century that was founded on comedic enactment of racial stereotypes. The earliest shows were staged by white men with black painted faces and caricatured the singing and dancing of slaves. (Encyclopedia Britannica)
2. Blaxploitation Films- Films made in the mid-1970's that featured Black actors as hero/heroine and leading characters, although they highlighted racialized stereotypes. The genre was originally intended for Black audiences, but appeal broadened across racial lines once its profitability was discovered (Encyclopedia Britannica)
3. Delany Cards (Visual Seating Plan)- Method of classroom management extensively used in the New York metropolitan area. It is 1x3 inch card that contains the name of student, names, telephone numbers, addresses and other emergency information for each student. (Wikipedia)

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