

# Navigating Intra-racial and Interracial Relationships at a Jesuit High School: Using Resilience Theory and Critical Race Theory to Craft a Framework for Success

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*Upon arriving at my Jesuit high school in Detroit I became acutely aware of my positionality in a school populated by Whites, affluent African Americans, and students with two parents at home. Being neither White nor affluent, and being emotionally incarcerated while my father was physically incarcerated, my emotions oscillated between anger, hostility, and confusion. As such, I am called to reflect on recent conversations with African American males similarly positioned at Jesuit high schools. In fact, their stories, situated alongside my own, ground this autoethnographic paper within two theoretical frameworks—resilience theory and critical race theory. By utilizing these frameworks, it is my intention to move beyond a language of crisis that framed my experiences and locate my experiences and those of the students within the juxtaposition of the possibilities associated with a Jesuit education and the resilience and centrality of interracial and intraracial relationships that frame being the “other” in Jesuit schools.*

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In the classic hip hop anthem *Juicy* by the Notorious B.I.G. (1994), he extols the virtues of his rise from drug dealing in Brooklyn to one of the most celebrated MC’s in the history of hip hop. He wrote:

I never thought it could happen, this rappin' stuff I was too used to packin' gats and stuff. Now homies play me close like butter played toast. From the Mississippi down to the east coast, condos in Queens, indo for weeks, sold out seats to hear Biggie Smalls speak. Livin' life without fear puttin' 5 karats in my baby girl's ears. (Notorious B.I.G., 1994, track 10)

Notorious B.I.G.’s self-introspection in *Juicy* has always spoken to me and in many ways made me appreciate the challenge of leaving my Detroit neighborhood to attend, and graduate from, a

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mostly White Jesuit high school. Throughout my lifetime, numerous people have suggested to me that my story of navigating a lifetime of emotional incarceration during my father's physical incarceration, is a great example for African American men similarly positioned. Similarly, those same people often insinuate that I am somehow different from African American men who haven't graduated from elite private schools, or "achieved success" as a university professor. The meanings of these comments were crystallized for me upon reading Harper's (2009) understanding of being niggered whereby far too many African American men are subjected to erroneous assumptions that we are all the same, troubled, and failing. While some would suggest that my alumni sweatshirt from my Jesuit high school is a major accomplishment, others are confounded as one person asked me in the airport—"who gave you that sweatshirt?" Such experiences are problematic in numerous ways, because they are a part of the process that far too many Black males must endure, being "niggered".

The previously mentioned reaction to my sweatshirt denies the fact that I earned it, and subtly and at times overtly questions my legitimacy as a Jesuit alumnus. The disbelief or the need to chat me up once they have discerned that I am a legitimate alumnus is akin to MosDef's (2002) reflection of riding in first class on an airplane in *Mr. Nigga*:

Like, late night I'm on a first class flight, the only brother in sight the flight attendant catch fright. I sit down in my seat, 2C. She approach officially talkin about, "Excuse me." Her lips curl up into a tight space cause she don't believe that I'm in the right place. Showed her my boarding pass, and then she sort of gasped. All embarrassed put an extra lime on my water glass. An hour later here she comes by walkin past, "I hate to be a pest but my son would love your autograph." Wowwww Mr. Nigga I love you, I have all your albums. (MosDef, 2002, track 15)

As MosDef (2002), Harper (2009), and Notorious B.I.G. (1994) reflect on various life experiences that have helped them make sense of coming from an urban existence in Brooklyn, or being niggered in various ways, my usage of autoethnography will similarly attempt to offer plausible insights into the ways that I navigated the interracial and intraracial relationships and experiences at a Jesuit high school.

### **Why Autoethnography?**

As an evolving qualitative research instrument, autoethnography takes autobiographical information from the researcher as the most essential data and embraces an analysis linked to culture and the interpretation of actions and thoughts (Boyd, 2008). Having evolved over the last 15 years in part as a response to "the postmodern skepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims" (Anderson, 2006, p. 373), autoethnography is aligned with "either the constructivism-interpretivism or critical-ideological paradigms" (McIlveen, 2008, p. 3). Defined by Spry (2001) as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (p. 710), many researchers embrace autoethnography because of its utility in exploring their relationship to participants in other research projects on similar topics (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). With that in mind, my usage of autoethnography, based on my previous research on African American males attending Jesuit high schools (Simmons, 2012), is appropriate for this paper.

## NAVIGATING INTRARACIAL AND INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Used in such fields as education, psychology, and sociology (McIlveen, 2008), the usage of autoethnography in this paper serves as an extension of my own life experiences while also creating a space in my scholarship to understand my own reality while simultaneously enabling me to make sense of my connectivity to the African American males I have been interviewing and observing over the last two years (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Because of this connectivity to the experiences of these students, I have come to realize that I needed to find an educational research tradition that embraces my emotional and experiential connection to this line of inquiry instead of “assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 2). Not only does autoethnography embrace the ideas of self-reflection and the social interconnection of emotion and experience, it also enables me to assemble my experiences and begin to make meaning out of them.

### **Jesuit High Schools**

Developed by members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), a religious order of the Catholic Church, Jesuit high schools are built upon the Jesuit secondary education model that emphasizes the importance of schooling to the formation of character, and a desire to integrate service to others with the need to excel academically (O’Malley, 1989). With 59 mostly single gender high schools in the United States and Canada, Jesuit high schools are recognized for their students’ matriculation to college and graduation rates that exceed 95% (Wirth, 2007). Given these outcomes, African American males attending these schools would seem to have an increased chance of overcoming the distressing statistics that frame their academic experiences by graduation rates as low as 20% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2008) and similar data associated with attending and graduating from college (Rowley & Bowman, 2009; Toldson, Brown, & Sutton, 2009). While the statistics of students graduating from Jesuit high schools and subsequently attending colleges and universities are impressive, there is a paucity of literature that examines the experiences of African American males attending these schools. If one were to lack a critical lens of the experiences of students at these schools it is quite possible that Wirth’s (2007) general assertion that all is well at Jesuit high schools for all students, could serve as the grand narrative. There is significant danger in falling trap to this grand narrative when one considers the challenges students of color face attending a prep school as addressed in the groundbreaking documentary *Prep School Negro*. As African American males comprise less than 27% of the student population nationally at Jesuit high schools, navigating race and racism during their schooling experiences is akin to life as the “prep school Negro.”

### **Being the *Prep School Negro* at a Jesuit High School**

My story of attending a Jesuit high school is echoed in the documentary, *Prep School Negro* (2012). As the students in *Prep School Negro* discuss the challenges they faced when dealing with the White students and their African American peers in their urban neighborhoods and in school, it becomes apparent that I am the “prep school Negro.” Numerous students in the documentary discuss such things as “acting white” and the problematic development of their relationships with their peers in their communities. To provide plausible insights into being the “prep school negro” at a Jesuit high school, the development of an autoethnography that explores how I managed to navigate the interracial and intraracial dynamics, using critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework, is being utilized. CRT’s belief that the stories of people of

color are often times decentered, or marginalized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009), is situated alongside a central tenet of CRT that counter storytelling provides an alternative to a grand narrative. Within the grand narrative commonly associated with students' experiences at Jesuit high schools, Wirth's (2007) seminal text on Jesuit high schools, *They Made All the Difference: Life-Changing Stories from Jesuit High Schools*, offers some reasonable insights into the inner-workings of a variety of Jesuit high schools and extols the virtues of attending a Jesuit high school. She notes that Jesuit high schools are successful in large part because of the attention to the individual needs of the students as well as their immense alumni support. However, her work gives little to no attention to matters of race, racism, or considering how students of color subsist. As such, the autoethnography presented in this paper responds to York's (1996) call for more research on "smaller, more discrete populations of students in Catholic schools" (p. 13), and has the potential to disrupt, and potentially enhance, our understanding of the experiences of some African American students from urban communities who are being educated at Jesuit high schools.

In response to the call for exploring the successful stories of African American men in education, it is my intention to utilize critical race theory (CRT) to frame my critical autoethnography of being an African American male from an urban community attending a Jesuit high school, but also to utilize resilience theory as I interpret my experiences. Looking back on my high school experiences from 1988-1992, I have come to realize that it is a microcosm of one element of the African American male experience at both predominately white universities and Jesuit high schools in the United States. Certainly my experience isn't reflective of all African American males but I firmly believe that the resilience I was required to demonstrate and have nurtured by my mother and grandmother could provide lessons to others similarly positioned. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with autoethnographic slices of the seminal moments of my time as a student at a Jesuit high school in alignment with the results of research by Harper (2009) and numerous other scholars who explicate some the challenges of many African American males face when attending predominately white K-16 institutions.

I will begin by giving some context for my high school experience that demonstrates my early struggles to adjust to the school setting in order to provide an understanding of the divergent environments to which I was subjected —neighborhood and school. Secondly, I will explore the interracial and intraracial dynamics I encountered at school. At the conclusion of each section focusing on the intraracial and interracial interactions, I will offer a "so what does this mean?" section. In these sections, I will utilize the theoretical frameworks that are central to this work to help make sense of my experiences. I conclude by drawing linkages between my experiences with the interracial and intraracial dynamics I encountered and those of African American boys from urban communities similarly positioned to myself. Furthermore, I will offer some suggestions to students and the Jesuit secondary education community.

### **My Journey**

Getting to my high school required riding two public busses. The 7:22 bus left Wyoming and Tireman headed toward the other side of the city and my mostly White Jesuit high school. Over the course of four years riding that 7:22 bus, I was given an opportunity to reflect. I would reflect on the meaning of my attendance at a Jesuit high school. I was able to reflect on my interactions, for the first time, with White students. I had the chance to reflect on my interactions

with African American students from affluent homes in the suburbs and the city. While my high school was located in the city, and the Jesuit leadership at the school had decided—against the insistence of many White alumni—to stay in the city as other Catholic schools fled to the suburbs, the population of African American students was only approximately 30%.

Growing up on the west side of Detroit during the 1980s, not far from the epicenter of the 1967 social uprising, the sight of Whites in my neighborhood was few and far between. As a result of the events in 1967 on 12<sup>th</sup> and Claremont, White flight expedited the already segregated nature of Detroit. In fact, the hypersegregation of the Detroit metropolitan area would significantly impact my perceptions of race and White people. In a neighborhood entirely populated by African Americans it never crossed my mind that the members of my core group of friends were strictly African American. In fact, I just assumed that was normal. Playing basketball on a rim, not exactly regulation as it was made out of a milk crate, and using a small basketball, we carved out our niche in the neighborhood amidst the troubling development of the crack cocaine epidemic. Drug houses began popping up, adults addicted to crack were walking the streets, and friends were succumbing to the pressures of the drug trade—dealers, runners, and users. Nonetheless, I existed amidst this chaotic environment all the while being pushed by my mother and grandmother towards being a scholar. With the consistent incarceration of my father and the rise in crime in my neighborhood, my mother turned towards a Jesuit high school when I was entering 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

The incarceration of my father not only had an indelible impact on my views on fatherhood but shaped my views on African American males at my high school who had active fathers—a bit of resentment, jealousy, and sadness. I had no idea what it meant to have a father. I had no idea when Father’s Day was celebrated. Yet, I was forced to attend a school with others who did. Later in my life I came to realize that my anger about this came out in various ways in high school—fighting, cussing at the teacher, and crying before school. These misbehaviors and youthful indiscretions took place at the intersection of experiencing my first educational environment whereby I was in the numeric minority. This world was so very different from my neighborhood and previous schooling experiences—White, affluent, and complicated.

### **Interracial Interactions at a Jesuit High School**

My first step off of the 7:22 bus and into my Jesuit high school heightened my awareness of the salience of race. All the faces on the bus looked like me, yet a smaller percentage of the students in my high school did. It was strange to me—I was at a school in Detroit, yet very few people looked like me. This introduction to race at a Jesuit high school came with a startling jolt: I had better figure it out quickly or suffer the same fate as other African American males from Detroit before me who left my high school frustrated, exhausted, and confused.

Having been raised by a mother with a degree from Spelman College, my perception of race revolved around the understanding that our experiences as African Americans were often times marginalized. This became very clear when I entered into a world history class that centered Europe’s accomplishments as “classic” and the rest of the world as “other.” I openly challenged these ideas in class and subsequently was pegged radical. In fact, several White students in my class openly challenged my ideas. As a result, I had a very strained relationship with them, and my teacher viewed my work through this lens as opposed to an objective lens.

As my disposition towards the Eurocentric nature of the history and literature curricula developed, my interracial understanding would be challenged when I began to strike up a

friendship with Tom. Our friendship evolved out of our participation in sports. He was the quarterback on the football team and I was a wide receiver. As such, we bonded during practice, games, and casual conversations about school. During one of our conversations he revealed that he lived in the city. I'm sure my reaction showed my disbelief of Whites that told me that they live in the city—do you live in the city limits or in the suburbs? Tom's response—I live in the city limits. This discovery challenged my understanding of race and Detroit. In fact, I had never met a White person who lived in the city until that moment. Utilizing his experiences going to work with his father, a principal at a school in the city, and attending a Catholic middle school with African American students, Tom seemed to adopt a color-blind stance. He commented one time that he did not see the color of people and that was why he was able to work with all sorts of people. At the time, this struck me as a strange assessment of race considering the negative imagery of African Americans that was in the media. Perhaps the negative imagery that I observed, and that was consistently discussed in my home, wasn't relevant to his home life. Nonetheless, Tom and I never discussed my growing reputation as the resident revolutionary. As a result, Tom's friendship became a marker for two reasons—understanding the role of color blindness and the utility of sports as a bridge for interracial friendships.

As I was attempting to negotiate my daily reality in school and in my neighborhood, my academic achievement was less than stellar. In fact, my grades prohibited my participation in playing football for the majority of my sophomore year. Disheartened by this development, and by the additional discussion of possibly “not being able to make it here” with an administrator and a teacher, I began to harbor resentment towards the environment. Noting the Whiteness of the students and the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum, not to mention my struggles in Algebra II and French, I began to respond to the previous assertion by an administrator and a teacher in an affirmative manner—maybe I don't belong here. It was at this moment during my sophomore year that I retreated to a place that felt alone. I didn't fit in at school nor did I fit in within my peer group in my neighborhood anymore...I had become the prep school negro. As noted in the highly acclaimed documentary, *The Prep School Negro*, this feeling of being called “white” by your African American friends in your neighborhood, yet not having enough financial resources to fit in with your affluent African American peers at school, caused great anxiety every time I got off the bus at the end of the day and great consternation at the beginning of the day.

Throughout the process of trying to negotiate the interracial schooling experience, my mother and grandmother played significant roles. Additionally, in making it to the point where I became resigned to the possibility of being dismissed from school and simultaneously began to come to terms with my hostility towards my incarcerated father, I had come to a turning point in my development. A neighborhood friend, Mike, played a significant role in this shift.

A few years older than I, Mike had been kicked out of several public schools but would always tell me that I “was going to be somebody.” He would lament the errors of his ways and time being locked up, and shared the lessons he learned along the way. While Mike had no vision for himself, he had a vision for me, which was reflected in the advice he often gave: —“don't let those White folks get in your way, cuz!” And I didn't. I returned to the Jesuit school for my junior year with a healthy understanding of what I needed to do to “not let White folks get in my way.”

**So what does this mean?: Situating family in an understanding of resilience.** While Jesuit schools aren't typically considered independent private schools, they have some of the same characteristics, including tuition and a mostly White affluent student body. As such, Datnow and Cooper's (2009) work in these types of schools suggests that my struggle with the

interracial dimensions of being “othered” by the school curriculum, being the other in the schooling demographics, and trying to navigate two worlds, is a fairly common experience for African American students. When placing my academic struggles and emotional incarceration alongside my fathers’ physical incarceration, extant literature focusing on at-risk students suggest that graduating from this Jesuit high school was not a forgone conclusion (Simmons, 2000). Yet others would use resilience theory (Noguera, 2003; Nettles & Pleck, 1994; Payne, 2011) to inform their understanding of my potential to succeed and reconceptualize my “at-risk” profile. As contemporary theorists in the field have challenged the traditional perspective of resilience that suggests that resilience is something that individuals have as opposed to a process facilitated by families, communities, and environments (Ungar, 2011), my experience supports the latter position. In other words, my success at a largely white, private Catholic school set in the Detroit can be attributed to the support I received from my family and extended family during my time at the school.

As was true in my case, the construction of the resiliency of the individual is connected to family resilience amidst various crises. At the same time, resilience is also the product of the kinship network unique among African American families of developing connections of formal kin, informal kin, and community organizations outside of the traditional, blood-relative paradigm (Walsh, 2011). The consistent crises in my family—money and my father’s incarceration—forced us to band together in an effort to make it from day to day. This coming together, similar to the African proverb “We are, therefore, I am” (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005, p. 88), allowed me to observe the resilience of my mother and grandmother and be nurtured while also witnessing how to adapt to various challenges (Walsh, 2011).

My mother constantly repeated James Brown’s (1968) declaration “*Say it Loud –I’m Black and I’m Proud*,” as a way of providing me with a racial identity deeply rooted in pride. As such, this protective layer linked to my racial identity (Brown, 2008) gave me the confidence to go to school everyday prepared to deal with the racial microaggressions of White students and teachers. When understanding that an outcome of these “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities” (Sue et al., 2008, p.72) can be psychologically damaging or force African Americans into a self-imposed mental and physical exile, the role of family in supporting and nurturing the resilience of African American youth is unquestioned.

### **Intraracial Interactions at a Jesuit High School**

Navigating this new reality that included White students from the suburbs pulling up in the latest BMW, or the acknowledged presence of Skinheads roaming the halls and sitting in class with me, I realized that this struggle was not mine alone. As a result of a series of events in classrooms, and an administrative disconnect from the issues facing African American students, a core group of us began discussing an African American student union, otherwise known as the Black Awareness Society for Education (BASE). In the basement of the school 10-15 African American students gathered during the lunch hour to formulate our rationale for such an organization. In a school where African American students made up 30% of the student population (650 students attended the school), it took negotiation with the administration and the good fortune of finding a faculty sponsor, for our organization to be born. Over the course of the next year we would formulate a mission, organize meetings, and select the two texts that would become central to our existence, not just as an organization but as a group young African American men: *Visions for Black Men* by Na’im Akbar (1991) and *The African Origin of*

*Civilization: Myth or Reality* by Cheikh Anta Diop (1974).

Akbar's text in particular was the central focus of our meetings as we discussed how his work intersected with our experiences. Certainly, our understanding didn't rival the musings of doctoral students or professors well versed in Black psychology, but his declaration that African American men should understand the differences between being a *man* and a *male* provided me with sustenance. Accordingly, as a collective and individually, our awareness of our responsibility in the community as well as how we carry ourselves in the community resonated loudly in our meetings and minds. The forward movement associated with this organization resulted in an increased sense of community amongst the largely senior led group. Looking for something to do that could animate our new understandings and provide a venue for our ideas, we decided to develop two major projects, a newsletter dubbed the *Afrocentric* and a conference that addressed issues facing African American youth. Not only did both of these projects take off but, the conference also brought other African American students at non-Jesuit private schools in the metropolitan area to the table. Discussing issues ranging from the crack cocaine epidemic to education, this first conference of its kind in the area provided us with a great comfort—we learned that many of our peers were dealing with being 30%, sometimes less, of the student population at private schools.

While the moments previously discussed demonstrated the power of our collective action towards a cause rightly situated within the Jesuit ideals of justice and action, my arrival on the 7:22 bus every morning was the beginning of my transition from a neighborhood of families that would be considered poor and working class African Americans to an environment that introduced me to the interworking's of the African American elite. During my childhood on the west side of Detroit I never realized how differently African Americans lived in the city. On one end of the spectrum were families living in neighborhoods ravaged by crime and could only dream of a life like that represented on the *Cosby Show*. At the other end of the spectrum were families occupying neighborhoods that had private security details, gated communities, and four car garages. The hypersegregation in my neighborhood, along with the constant reminder of the impact the crack cocaine epidemic was having on our community, produced a counternarrative to the lived experiences of some of more affluent African American classmates. With this new reality serving as a life lesson on a daily basis, I quickly realized how different I was.

Some might assume that jealousy, teasing, or other bullying types of behaviors might exacerbate the economic differences between myself the more affluent African American students in my class. This was not the case. While I never felt as if I totally fit in when placed in social settings outside of school or conversations associated with the latest fashions that were common among them, I recognized our solidarity in moments of individual or group crisis. At moments when confronted with an anonymous piece of hate mail because of a piece that I wrote for the *Afrocentric* or for my penchant for publicly displaying the red, black, and green African medallions popularized by X-Clan, the cafeteria table was always home...our common space for conversation and support. Home in the sense of—"Rob, we have your back." As a result, the intraracial dynamics of my high school experience provided support amidst the active and passive forms of racism that we encountered as the cultural other in an elite, Jesuit high school.

**So what does this mean? Reconceptualizing resilience within a *site of resilience framework*.** The peer network that was established from the moment I entered into this Jesuit high school provided a support system that allowed me to effectively navigate the challenges I faced in the classroom and socially. When situated within a critical race theory framework, it is helpful to understand that African American students from urban communities, recruited to

Jesuit schools under the guise of a commitment to diversity, are potentially walking into situations whereby the elements of justice associated with the Civil Rights Movement are compromised (Stovall, 2005). Despite the value in having a diverse student population, our collective response with BASE and the need to recharge at the “Black table” in the cafeteria is supported by Payne’s (2011) reconceptualization of resilience.

Payne’s (2011) site of resilience model suggests that the development of BASE, and the associated readings by Akbar (1991) and Diop (1974), provided us with an opportunity develop our resilience in relationship to others similarly positioned. Unlike more traditional interpretations of resilience that seem to suggest a “pick yourself up and keep going” understanding of resilience (Walsh, 2011), the site of resilience model views the individual acting in concert with “key ethnically and culturally based relationships” (Payne, 2011, p. 436) as central to the animation of resiliency. In the case of our interactions at BASE, it was less about what the organization might have meant to Whites who viewed us as a threat, and more about our usage of this organization as a tool of survival.

As BASE is aligned with the relational aspect of the site resilience model, the “Black table in the cafeteria” fits within understanding the role of space towards developing resiliency. In response to the active and passive racism (Tatum, 1997) in our school lives, our table in the cafeteria created space for us to strengthen our individual and collective resiliency (Payne, 2011). Moreover, these efforts to create a site for resiliency development are supported by Walsh’s (2011) contention that a “resilience-oriented systems approach” (p. 174) contributes to the building and sustaining of resilience.

### **Recommendations for Personnel/Professional Transformative Practice**

Recruiting and retaining African American students from urban communities is an important aspect of Jesuit secondary education (Jesuit Secondary Education Association, 2002). However, little attention has been given to their experiences at these high schools. In an effort to contribute to creating a framework for success, I will focus on students and the development of effective organizational structures to support them.

#### **Students**

I have spent a long time wondering what my life would have been like if I had not attended my Jesuit high school. Dealing with an incarcerated father, living in a neighborhood that was ravaged by the crack cocaine epidemic, and being raised by a single mother and grandmother, placed me in an at-risk category. I suppose there are statistics that provide indicators for determining who is at-risk, but my latest reading of *12 Angry Men: True Stories of Being a Black Man in America Today* (Parks & Hughey, 2010), would suggest that every African American man in this country is at-risk—at-risk of being racially profiled, at-risk of being mistaken for another African American male who “looks” like you, at-risk of being niggered. While these occurrences have happened to me as an adult, they are also similar to the racial microaggressions that I experienced attending my Jesuit high school. Accordingly, there are three lessons that I learned that will provide insight for students.

**1: Know when to walk away—be silent or confront.** It is not my intention to rehash my experiences anymore than I have already done. It is my intention to raise the bigger question—how do you respond to racial microaggressions? At times I lashed out with anger, and other

times I used my silence to make a statement. One of the lessons that I learned was this—some things are best left unsaid and some things are worth walking away from.

**2: Street smarts are not smart in every environment.** When you live in an urban neighborhood similar to mine, entering a Jesuit school that is still in an urban environment, it's useful to recognize that you will learn more than what's taught in the classroom. As previously mentioned, my attendance at my high school was my first encounter with African Americans where debutante balls and banquets at the golf club were commonplace. While I had spent time at the country club carrying the golf bag for the African American elite and their White business associates, I had never been inside where the members ate. When I had the opportunity to do so with a classmate and his family, I recognized that my "hood sensibilities" that deemed it necessary to carry a switchblade in my backpack were of no use in that world. As my classmate and I were standing out front waiting for his father, reality struck—"valet park my car in a spot on the end...I just got it waxed." This statement made to me by a member of the golf club not associated with the people I was with, was stark reminder that I lived in two different worlds.

**3: Observe everything when in new environments and experiences.** Entering a Jesuit high school in the manner in which I did, I availed myself to a new environment wrought with new experiences. Certainly I had moments where I reacted inappropriately, and perhaps overreacted at times, to incidents that I perceived to be racialized or happening to me because of the financial differences between myself and my African American classmates. Yes, I was teased because I didn't have the latest fashions. Yes, I was challenged by the covert and overt racism that took place. What I didn't do was take a step back and make observations of what was happening. What I didn't do was work through my anger by talking to someone—I internalized all of it and exploded at times. Looking back on it all I am sure that I would have had a more positive experience, and better grades, had I done more observation early on. I could have observed others. I could have observed teachers. I could have even observed myself, and done some self-reflection to check my responses before exploding or perhaps not responding.

### **Institutional Recommendations: BASE—Understandings its Utility in Jesuit Schools**

Over the past two and a half years I have been afforded the opportunity to visit eight Jesuit high schools while conducting research. During these experiences my appreciation for having attended a Jesuit school grows. As some of the African American students I visit express their consternation about being called out for sitting at the "Black table" in the cafeteria or facing a White student who thinks it's cool to "talk Black," I have concluded that some schools are well positioned to deal with these realities while others seem to be silent. During my high school years, the creation of BASE was a powerful moment. Certainly it had larger ramifications for how this school was viewed in the larger Jesuit community, but the personal meaning I derived from this allowed me to continue at the school—not just academically but emotionally. BASE provided me with a space to vent, an opportunity to learn about myself, and an opportunity to learn in a community facing similar challenges on a daily basis.

The impetus for developing BASE was clearly tied to students taking the initiative, but it also dovetails with the social justice portion of the Jesuit mission. More specifically, the development of BASE animates "one of the five essential outcomes of Jesuit secondary education" (Scibilia, Giamario, & Rogers, 2009, p. 49) whereby students are called to live out social justice through their actions. Living out social justice through action is fully endorsed by one the most celebrated Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe (Superior General of the Society of Jesus,

1965-1983). As he noted in his legendary speech in 1973 at the Tenth International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe, creating *men for others* (a core tenet of most Jesuit high schools) (Arrupe, 1973), is deeply embedded in social justice as more than an abstraction. While some have called his legendary address radical, others have suggested that he was simply challenging those involved with Jesuit education to engage in justice work as a calling—a calling beyond talking about it. More to the point, Arrupe aligned his ideas with the Gospels' social dimensions calling on us to not remain silent about inequity and the promotion of social justice as indispensable within the Jesuit community (Molloy, 2007). Accordingly, embracing BASE as an institution, or other similarly positioned organizations supporting students of color, is something that Jesuit schools are called to do.

At times I am sure the existence of BASE, and my personal perspective (I was voted most likely to lead a revolution), rattled some cages, but the administrative courage it took to support this organization has had a lasting impact—BASE is still running strong. So what does the development of BASE mean for the larger Jesuit secondary education community? Perhaps it means different things to different people. Some might postulate that “we do not have race issues in our school,” and others might suggest that such organizations are divisive. I would argue that neither of these assessments is true. Organizations similar to BASE exist within Jesuit schools not to divide people but to bring people together. Furthermore, if we don't look for a variety of methods, especially those that are supported by research (e.g. resiliency theory), and reflective of the Jesuit commitment to *cura personalis* (care for the entire person), the only question to be asked is—is the Jesuit mission of social justice rhetoric or an actionable phrase?

### **Parents and Teachers**

During a recent visit to a Jesuit high school in the Midwest, I was afforded an opportunity of attending a meeting of the parent association. What was most interesting to me, and had not occurred to me as a possibility, was the significant presence of teachers at the meeting. As the group worked through the usual business of fundraising and arranging transportation to away football games, the conversation shifted toward ensuring the success of all the students. The teachers and parents discussed what was going on with the students in school and outside of school. Additionally, there was a culture of respect whereby the teachers acknowledged the parents as teachers, and the parents acknowledged the teachers as an extension of their role as parents. Certainly this might seem like a stretch in some school cultures but in this school it worked for everyone. These types of understandings are aligned with Lightfoot's (2003) assertion that parents and teachers can, and must, learn from each other.

### **Conclusion**

My development in a Jesuit high school was significantly impacted by interracial dynamics. The traditional understanding of this dynamic asserts that I was living in two very different worlds trying to navigate the racial and financial differences between my White classmates and myself (Datnow & Cooper, 2009). With CRT as a lens, a much more nuanced understanding of my experiences would lead to my detachment from the Eurocentric curriculum. As CRT acknowledges the ways I was raced in particular ways, and niggered in others, I was erased from the curriculum in literature and history courses. This isn't to suggest that there is no value in the curriculum at Jesuit high schools. What I am suggesting is that there needs to be a

larger discussion about developing a more inclusive curriculum that is less Eurocentric and fosters a greater appreciation for world history from multiple perspectives. Such innovations would not only bring non-White students closer to the course content but also provide a new lens for White students to view others and themselves.

The support that was created at my high school was partially endorsed by the administration (development of BASE) but also a communal exercise in survival. When understanding BASE and the *Black table* in the cafeteria using Payne's (2011) site of resiliency model, the communal protection provided against racial microaggressions is relevant for understanding my experiences then and now. Looking at my current research on African American males attending Jesuit high schools, I have come to the conclusion that these students are contending with racist language and social isolation that could render them mute when called on to speak out (Simmons, 2012). Accordingly, allowing African American males the space to have same race conversations about their experiences would empower them with the skills to make appropriate choices when backed into a corner. As endorsed by the work of Tatum (1997), these types of groups have the potential to offer a support system and allow the students to learn from each other.

As Jesuit high schools continue to impact the lives of African American males, there is a significant need to study the ways that schools are successful. In other words, the next stage of research should include a focus on systemic ways that supports are built into Jesuit high schools but also a more focused study of the alumni and parents. Considering the long history African Americans have of attending schools in the Catholic education tradition, it is safe to assume that this will not change. As such, it is important for the research community to move beyond the argument that creates a false binary placing Catholic education at one end and public education at the other. The larger question becomes—what can we do to support African American males in the schooling environments where they are located?

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### Note

1. Names have been changed throughout this paper to ensure anonymity.