The Beginning : Exploring Educational Experiences of Black Boys in State-Funded Preschools

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THE BEGINNING: EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK BOYS IN
STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOLS

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2020

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

THE BEGINNING: EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK BOYS IN

STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOLS

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Abstract

THE BEGINNING: EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK BOYS IN STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOLS

by Keisha M. Wint

Understanding their early educational experiences may provide valuable information for supporting optimal development. However, there is limited research to account for the subjective relational experiences of young children in school. Through a life course perspective, this qualitative study explored the educational experiences of four preschool-aged Black boys attending a state-funded program in an urban district in New Jersey. Using a narrative inquiry approach, their stories captured positive aspects of their relational experiences with their teachers by highlighting the individual, relational, and contextual aspects of child well-being. Their voices offer unique considerations for supporting Black boys in preschool and will enrich the child well-being framework for teachers, families, and policymakers within the early learning context.

Keywords: Black boys, preschool, teacher-child relationships, narrative inquiry, child well-being.
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Dedication

To my mom, you are the most beautiful, kind, amazing, yet humble woman I know.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

If there’s one thing I’ve learned in life, it’s the power of using your voice. I tried my best to speak the truth and shed light on the stories of people who are often brushed aside.

—Michelle Obama, *Becoming*

Bryan was a curious, playful, 4-year-old Black boy. He was slightly taller than his peers and had a short curly afro which framed his cocoa-brown skin, and bright, brown eyes. He was a child in one of the many preschool classrooms I supported as a preschool intervention and referral team (PIRT) coach. His new, enthusiastic, third year teacher reported feeling overwhelmed with what she called his lack of focus and attention. She expressed concern about the way Bryan would blurt out answers during large group and story read-a-louds. She complained he would run from one center to the next during choice time and expressed frustration because he was not able to, *just sit still*. Initially, Bryan seemed to love school and would eagerly burst in the doors and wash his hands for breakfast during morning arrival. However, throughout the 10-month school year, I noticed a change. The bright light of curiosity and wonder that seemed to radiate from his big brown eyes in the early days of September, now in January, had almost seemed to disappear.

During a classroom visit to consult with his teacher regarding the progress of suggested support strategies, I saw Bryan sitting alone at the far end of the room. When I approached and asked why he was there alone, he sadly replied, “I here cuz her said I bad.” Surprised, saddened, and angered by the thought of what this characterization meant for his developing identity, sense of self, and beliefs about school, I wondered where this story would end for Bryan. Over the years as a PIRT coach, I had seen children experience a range of challenges in preschool. However, I had never had a child voluntarily put himself in a corner.
I questioned whether Bryan’s feelings about school at the age of 4 would change in later years. I thought of the many boys I encountered during prior years as a school social worker in high school, middle, and elementary schools. Each year, I would see fewer boys in classrooms as they transitioned to higher grade levels. During some years, the 3:1 ratio of boys to girls I had seen in some preschool classrooms was reversed as those children transitioned to the fourth grade. These numbers shifted as boys were suspended, expelled, placed in special education, or simply stopped attending school. It had never occurred to me this issue was a concern for boys of color, specifically Black boys. This phenomenon it seemed, was only taking place within my school community. I would later discover these practices were happening across the nation (U.S. Department of Education [DOE] Office of Civil Rights, 2014). My concern regarding the loss of Black boys in education led me on a journey back to their early years of school. Along the way, I gathered facts, listened to various accounts, and reviewed many statistics as I searched for answers.

I have often wondered about Bryan’s story. If permitted the time, space, and opportunity to explore his story further, would I uncover the mystery or answer questions regarding the encounters and interactions that led Bryan to that isolated corner? What and who would usher him out of that place of self-doubt as he transitioned from preschool to his kindergarten classroom? Or, would his “I am bad” sense of self persist? What kinds of relationships or experiences would put him on a path towards educational success? Would those early years in preschool taint his image about the engaging place school had the potential to be? Ultimately, I wondered if his teachers, parents, or administrators had an opportunity to hear his story, would their interactions with Bryan be different? Armed with these questions and others, I set out on a quest to understand ways to better support Black boys earlier in their educational journey. This
search would lead me back to the beginning to explore the critical foundational years and those relationships which can be so instrumental for educational and personal success.

**Problem Statement**

Educational challenges of Black males have been well documented in the literature for decades (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Rashid, 2009; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Achievement and discipline disparities are evident across their lifespan. The national rate of high school graduation for Black boys is 59%, compared to 80% for their White peers (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Additionally, Black boys are overrepresented in special education programs (Ford, 2006; Wright & Ford, 2017). Across the nation from kindergarten to 12th grade, Black boys account for 15% of out of school suspensions in comparison to 7% and 5% for Latino boys and White boys, respectively (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). According to a recent study by the DOE Office of Civil Rights (2014), Black preschool children experience even greater inequities as they are more likely to receive one or more school suspensions than White preschool children (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Specifically, Black preschool children make up 18% of the preschool population but represent 48% of the preschool children who have received out-of-school suspensions one or more times (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). In fact, Black boys are suspended more than any other racial group starting in preschool (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Experiencing school expulsions while in preschool initiates, or may increase, the chances of negative outcomes as children get older (Lamont, 2013; Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

Much of the literature regarding the educational experiences of Black boys points towards the challenges and academic opportunity gaps that exist for Black boys and men (Noguera, 2008; Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010). While important, this perspective often limits our vision for
identifying tools which may enhance educational success and well-being (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Iruka, Winn, et al., 2014; Wright & Counsell, 2018). A focus on challenges may inadvertently lead teachers, families, and Black boys themselves to conclude educational success is unattainable (Hargrove & Sealy, 2011; Yaffe, 2012). There is a need to rethink the way Black boys are thought about, discussed, and experienced both in the research community and in society (Wright & Counsell, 2018). This new perspective may allow more opportunities to uncover the multidimensional experiences of Black boys educated in the United States.

Child well-being is multidimensional and incorporates the physical, emotional, and social aspects of a child’s life (Moore et al., 2012; Statham & Chase, 2010). Indicators for child well-being should be flexible, and changing across developmental time, systems, and context (Statham & Chase, 2010). Child well-being must also include positive development (Pollard & Lee, 2003), and incorporate child-centered views (Fattore et al., 2012). Enhancing educational well-being for younger Black boys requires an understanding of their positive and subjective experiences in school.

Teacher-child relationship quality has been highly associated with child well-being outcomes (Lippman et al., 2011). High-quality instruction and close teacher-child relationships are predictors of increased academic outcomes for preschoolers (Howes et al., 2008). Researchers have frequently solicited narratives from teachers, parents, and administrators who support young learners regarding what they believe to be best for the well-being of Black boys (Iruka & Barbarin, 2009; Rowley et al., 2014). However, few studies have solicited opinions directly from Black boys about their early educational experiences and relationships with their teachers (Bacon et al., 2005; Howard, 2001; Nelson, 2016; Reichert & Hawley, 2014).
As more state and federal initiatives expand to provide universal preschool benefits for younger children (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2015) and Black boys in preschool continue to disproportionately suffer from high rates of suspension and expulsion practices (Gilliam et al., 2016; US DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014), exploring this beginning stage is critical. These early experiences may make lasting impressions and have significant implications for school engagement during subsequent years (Elder et al., 2003; Wright & Counsell, 2018). Enhancing the educational well-being for Black boys cannot wait for later years. Lack of adequate research at the earlier stages, relegates educators and policymakers to draw conclusions based on retrospective research conducted with older Black males, rather than incorporate timely age-appropriate data (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). In addition, requiring older Black boys and men to provide retroactive data focused on their early childhood experiences, may compromise the accuracy of those findings (Sheikh, 2018). To date, few studies have directly asked Black preschool boys about their early learning relational experiences. Subsequently, the subjective voices of their educational experiences of child well-being remains absent from the literature (Howard, 2001; Rowley et al., 2014). Given the disproportionate educational challenges experienced by Black boys at the beginning of their school journey, it is critical to know more about how to support their well-being in these early learning environments.

**Purpose of the Study**

The teacher-child relationship has consistently proven to be a significant factor for improving academic outcomes for young learners (Howes et al., 2008; Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Graves & Howes, 2011). The current study aimed to understand the experience of the teacher-child relationship from the viewpoint of Black preschool boys. Through a life course perspective,
this qualitative study explored the subjective, relational experiences of child well-being young Black boys had with their preschool teachers. This lived experience was captured through individual child and parent interviews, as well as in-class observations with four Black preschool boys attending a state-funded preschool program in a large urban district in New Jersey. The theoretically grounded research question which guided this inquiry is: In what ways do Black boys in state-funded preschool programs, experience child well-being practices from their teachers?

Significance of the Study

This study builds on three overarching areas of importance which include knowledge advancement, practical application, and methodological progress. First, the study fills a gap in the literature related to Black boys in preschool and prioritizes their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives over the opinions of outside observers. It simultaneously acknowledges the existence of their boyhood stage of development (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). In a society in which Black boys are often perceived as older and less innocent than their same age White peers (Goff et al., 2014), highlighting this innocent, nurture-dependent stage of development for Black boys provides a new perspective for those charged with supporting young learners. Second, this new knowledge will further inform our understanding of best practices, challenge hegemonic views, and broaden our shared understanding of what relational considerations matter most to Black boys in these early learning environments. Findings may inform preschool educators and policy makers about ways to strengthen teacher-child bonds and improve engagement for Black boys in state-funded programs. Finally, this study builds on prior research strategies for cocreating the meaning of child well-being with younger participants in the research process (Fattore et al., 2012). Although other studies have engaged preschool children in research regarding illness,
noise perception, general aspects of school, and neighborhood safety (Carnevale & Gaudreault, 2013; Katz et al., 2017; Patrick et al., 2011; van Kamp & Davies, 2013), to date, very few studies in the United States have collaborated with Black preschool boys to share their subjective experiences of their relationships with their teachers. In this regard, I hope to amplify a silenced voice and magnify the unseen experiences of a marginalized group within the educational realm. Starting at the beginning and exploring various experiences of Black preschool boys provided an opportunity to simply listen, see, and possibly understand. This posture may help correct course later in the educational journey while celebrating the subjective voice of the child as worthy, valid, and a required part of educational change.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized into five chapters. The current chapter provides a personal justification for my interest in the topic, an overview of the study, and the significance for exploring child well-being of Black boys in preschool. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical underpinnings of life course theory (Elder, 1998) and child well-being positive indicator framework (Lippman et al., 2011). This section also provides a historical context for state-funded preschool programming. In addition, I provide a critical analysis and synthesis of the relevant literature pertaining to Black boys during the early childhood years of development, with a specific focus on their teacher-child relationships. Chapter 3 describes the unique elements of narrative inquiry research approach. Throughout this chapter, I also outline the research processes by which I selected a school, recruited participants, generated, and analyzed the data. In Chapter 4, I present the constructed narratives of the four participants by highlighting their individual, relational, and contextual experiences of child well-being. Chapter 5 discusses
implications for practice and policy within the state-funded preschool context. I also outline limitations of this research study and make recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

The first years of life are critical for later outcomes. Young children have an innate desire to learn. That desire can be supported or undermined by early experiences. (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2002, p.1)

There is a dearth of research regarding the positive development of Black boys from the early learning years (Davis, 2003; Wright & Counsell, 2018). This missing developmental perspective has resulted in a compartmentalized and disjointed view of Black boys and men and has focused on lack or deficits rather than strengths in the educational realm (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Iruka, Winn et al., 2014). In addition, race and gender are often not acknowledged in positive development frameworks (Brown & Lee, 2013; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). These aspects of a child’s identity are often viewed as barriers to overcome rather than being recognized as an aspect of identity to be celebrated and incorporated into a child’s growth and development (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; National Black Child Development Institute [NBCDI], 2015). In the next two sections, I outline life course theory (Elder, 1998) and the child well-being positive indicator framework (Lippman et al., 2011). I also make suggestions for expanding the child well-being positive indicator framework to incorporate race, age, and gender in the individual category, as they are relevant considerations for the educational experiences of Black boys attending state-funded preschool programs.

Life Course Theory

The life course perspective provides a contextual backdrop, setting, or lens through which to explore, understand, and view the experiences of child well-being Black preschool boys have with their teachers. Life course theory evolved from a need to rethink and inform the ways social science researchers studied and understood human lives and development and suggests the life of
an individual must be understood in context (Elder, 1998). Life course theory is distinct from life span theory, which focuses on the sequencing and processes of developmental stages, and the duration of time between the life and death of an organism (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Specifically, life course theory emphasizes the interplay of social contexts, such as geographical location and relationships, in our understanding of human development (Elder, 1998). Honoring this perspective, sociologist Elder (1998) sought to explore the ways individuals at various stages of their lives were shaped by the events of the Great Depression during the 1930s. Researchers have also used life course theory as a theoretical framework for exploring the role of relationships within the educational context (Alwin, 2012; Brenner, 2011). This theory is appropriate for exploring the experiences of Black preschool boys with their teachers, as it highlights the importance of early learning relationships in the educational context during a specific developmental time (Brenner, 2011).

Human development is social and a child’s school experience is a significant factor in his overall development (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Brenner, 2011; Elder et al., 2003). These early experiences will likely influence subsequent outcomes (Alwin, 2012). Life course inquirers consider the myriad of ways the educational trajectory of a child might be shaped and altered by timing as well as historical and contextual occurrences in that child’s life (Elder et al., 2003). Contexts which influence a child’s experience of the educational system include various relationships within the school (e.g., teacher-child, teacher-parent, child-peers, and child-classroom), the family, and the interactions between schools and the communities within which they are housed (Elder et al., 2003). A child’s behavior is linked to the relational experiences he has with significant others and partially dependent on the institutions within which those relationships occur (Crosnoe et al., 2004). Subsequently, it is important to consider the
relationships as well as the context within which those relationships evolve. Key principles of life course theory underscore the importance of authentically exploring the human experience by understanding the relationships in an individual’s life (Elder et al., 2003).

Central Concepts and Defining Principles

Within sociological frameworks, time is delineated as chronological, social, and historical (Pallas, 1993). The five central principles of life course theory are timing, human agency, developmental processes, historical time and place, and linked lives (Elder, 1998). These principles emphasize the importance of time, context, and processes (Elder et al., 2003).

Timing

The principle of timing underscores the ways experiences may impact individuals differently based on when the event occurs (Elder, 1998). A related example of timing is illustrated by the age at which an individual enters college. Specifically, a student who enters college immediately after high school at 18 years of age, may likely have a distinctly different postsecondary educational experience than an adult who waits 10 years to begin college after joining the workforce or having children. Similarly, at the earlier stages of the developmental continuum, a young boy who begins preschool at the age of 3 or 4 years old may have a distinctly different experience of the educational system based on his chronological age as he transitions into school.

A typical 3-year-old boy may need support with his developing language abilities or self-help needs such as eating and toileting independently (Dodge et al., 2010). Contrastingly, an older first grader, who enters school at the age of 6 years old, the compulsory age for school attendance in the state of New Jersey (State of New Jersey, 2020), may have a different experience of school relative to his developmental needs. Considerations for the principal of
timing are particularly noteworthy for the experiences of younger children who transition into an educational setting at the nurture-dependent ages of 3 or 4. During this stage, it is critical he experience a stable, secure, nurturing attachment with the primary caregivers in his preschool setting, as he begins to develop his sense of identity and relate to others in his world (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University [CDCHU], 2015). The principle of timing is also critical as this very young child transitions into a new or unfamiliar environment which may also be distinctly different from his home (Howes & Shivers, 2006).

**Human Agency**

This principle refers to the choices, decisions, or plans of an individual which alter or shape their path and may have consequences for future trajectories (Elder, 1998). Examples of individual agency may be illustrated in decisions to participate in an extracurricular activity in high school, to pursue higher education, or to start a family. These individual decisions each have distinct consequences for future outcomes. Similarly, a relevant example of agency might be reflected in the choice or decision of a family to enroll their 3-year-old son in a local preschool program rather than keeping him at home. As a result of his parents’ decision, his exposure to a high-quality preschool program may result in growth in areas of social-emotional skills and language development for this preschool boy (Muennig, 2009; NIEER, 2015; Pungello et al., 2010). This head start in preschool may lead to future enjoyment of school and academic success for this young child. In this example, human agency or parental choice has the potential to shape a child’s subsequent educational experiences.

**Developmental Processes**

Developmental processes require a long-term perspective on the human experience and accounts for the interplay between social change and individual development (Elder et al., 2003).
This principle suggests development does not happen in a vacuum, nor does human progress and advancement have a beginning and an end (Elder, 1998). Rather, there is a sequence to life events, and earlier life decisions influence later outcomes. Accordingly, development is seen as a dynamic process that is the result of an interchange between an ever-evolving social world, changes in context, and the individual over time (Elder, 1998). This principle suggests a young child who attends preschool and experiences satisfying peer relationships and nurturing teacher-child connections during his initial years of school, will more likely transition to the next educational phase of kindergarten better adjusted to school and ready to engage (Elder et al., 2003).

**Historical Time and Place**

Considerations for historical context highlight the ways lives are shaped by the economic, social, and political climates of an environment (Elder, 1998). Although, some aspects of a child’s life may be constant, the unique distinctions of a given time, place, and being exposed to particular political and historical changes or events, can alter their life course (Pallas, 1998). Considerations for the principle of historical time and place are illustrated by highlighting relevant facts within U.S. history, such as the 1930s, known as an era of economic turmoil and distress. As Elder and Shanahan (2006) wrote, “Children of the Great Depression who were born in the 1920s, consistent with the life-stage principle, younger children, especially the boys, were most adversely influenced by the economic stresses of the economic collapse” (p. 675). Similarly, men who transitioned into adulthood during World War II also had unique coming of age experiences as a result of being exposed to trauma from that war (Elder & Shanahan, 2006).

More recently, federal and state legislation has increased preschool funding in the state of New Jersey, which expanded opportunities for young children to experience the benefits of early
childhood education (NIEER, 2015). The sociopolitical climate of the 21st century, changes in technology and modes of communication, make some aspects of the educational experiences markedly different for a preschool boy who attends school now, in contrast to a boy who attended preschool during the previous 60 years. However, there are also unfortunate similarities between the educational experiences of Black boys in the 1980s and the 2000s. Historically, Black males in the U.S. have been negatively shaped by their experiences across their lifespan within the educational system (Davis, 2003; Howard et al., 2013). Current shifts in acceptable racist rhetoric (Staats et al., 2017) and the ongoing proliferation of negative media images of Black boys and men, illustrate the ways historical contexts collectively impact the development of Black boys (Bryan, 2020; Howard et al., 2013).

Society’s negative views of Black boys and men which suggest they are hostile, defiant, and unintelligent (Ford, 2006; Rowley et al., 2014; Wright & Counsell, 2018), are in turn reified within the educational context and contribute to both the ongoing proliferation of violence and brutality enacted upon Black boys and men in society (Bryan, 2020), as well as negative teacher perceptions even of Black preschool boys (Gilliam et al., 2016). These consequences have resulted in Black boys experiencing disproportionate rates of suspension, expulsions, and referrals to special education (US DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Black boys are also underrepresented in gifted and talented classes and advanced placement courses, even when they are academically qualified (Ford, 2006; Hargrove & Sealy, 2011; Rowley et al., 2014). Accounting for the unique sociohistorical context Black males experience in education due to policy both in and out of school (Noguera, 2008) points to the critical need to create a new foundational beginning for young Black boys. A focus on historical time and place provides an
integrated understanding of how relationships and the context of cultural and societal shifts can shape the life of an individual (Elder, 1998).

**Linked Lives**

The principle of linked lives identifies ways individuals are shaped through the connections they have with significant others in their environment (Elder, 1998). In addition to familial relationships, the teacher-child relationship also provides an applicable example of how a child’s connection with those outside the family can promote positive development and well-being (Brenner, 2011). Consistent with this account, Crosnoe et al. (2004) explored the intergenerational connection between students and teachers. Researchers found, across groups of African American students in Grades 7-12, students who had more positive views of their teachers performed better academically and had fewer challenges in school (Crosnoe et al., 2004). Similarly, the adjustment, relationships, and engagement of young children with significant others during the early years, sets the foundation for how children develop later academic competencies (CDCHU, 2015; Ladd et al., 2000). The quality of significant relationships in the preschool environment may influence the success with which children manage subsequent transitions within the educational context (Barbarin, 2013).

A life course perspective reflects a clear emphasis on the connections of individuals with each other and the societies within which they live. This theory also accounts for macrolevel inequalities which may exist in society at large and subsequently in social institutions such as schools (Brenner, 2011). Time, connections, and context underscore a life course perspective of Black preschool boys. However, considerations for their optimal early learning experiences required a framework which emphasized positive indicators of child well-being. This next section delineates a working definition of child well-being and outlines relevant considerations
for exploring the experiences of Black preschool boys educated in the state-funded preschool context.

**Child Well-Being Positive Indicator Framework**

To enhance our shared understanding of optimal development for Black boys in state-funded preschool programs, it is important to identify positive indicators rather than focus on ameliorating problems or challenges (Lerner & Chase, 2019; Lippman et al., 2011). The goal of being “problem free” represents an obsolete view of how to foster optimal child development (Lerner, & Chase, 2019; Lippman et al., 2011). A focus on positive indicators reflects good developmental science and highlights the strengths and assets children need as they grow and develop. Identifying positive indicators of child well-being provides teachers and practitioners with measures to strive towards as they evaluate program outcomes (Lippman et al., 2011). Emphasizing positive indicators enhances the ability to identify and promote policies for educators to improve the lives of children earlier in the educational trajectory (Irůka, Winn et al., 2014; Wright & Counsell, 2018). These distinct considerations point towards a critical need for identifying positive indicators for Black boys in preschool.

**Foundations of Child-Well Being**

Historically, the term *well-being* was used interchangeably with the phrase *quality of life* and used to describe a person’s ability to effectively participate in the routines and activities deemed important within their cultural context (Weisner, 1998). The term *child well-being* evolved after engaging children in dialogues about what well-being meant (Ben-Arie, 2008). These conversations led to the understanding children and childhood ideas of well-being were distinctly different from those of adults (Ben-Arie, 2008; Statham & Chase, 2010). At its
conception, child well-being was measured using proxies such as household income and other observable measures (World Health Organization [WHO], 2007).

Over the past two decades, there have been efforts to develop a unified framework for capturing and measuring child well-being around the world (Ben-Arieh, 2008). The goal of identifying multidimensional features for supporting the optimal development of children was to foster skills and abilities that may help protect against negative experiences (Ben-Arieh, 2008; Fattore et al., 2009; Lippman et al., 2011; Moore et al., 2012). As these efforts illustrated, it may often be easier to identify negative indicators but prove more complex to uniformly agree on what constitutes positive child development (Lippman et al., 2011). As a result, efforts to develop a unified framework for well-being have been challenging. For example, while binge drinking, teen pregnancy, or skipping school are readily identifiable as negative behaviors for high school students, the consensus on what are the positive indicators for alcohol use, sexual health, and school attendance may be difficult to target (Lippman et al., 2011).

Despite these challenges, tools such as the “Revised Children’s Quality of Life Questionnaire” (KINDL-R; Ravens-Sieberer & Bullinger, 1998) were developed to measure child well-being. The KINDL-R tool is comprised of a 24-item Likert scale designed for children ages 3 to 17 years of age and requires the child or their proxy to reflect on six dimensions of well-being. These dimensions included physical, family, friends, as well as emotional (e.g., “I had fun”), self-esteem (e.g., “I felt proud”), and functioning at preschool (e.g., “I enjoyed preschool”; Ravens-Sieberer & Bullinger, 1998). With the intent of identifying strengths, scholars called for an intentional focus on the presence of positive indicators and ways children thrived and flourished rather than a lack or deficits of skills, abilities, or conditions; this provided a goal for measuring and defining child well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2008; Fattore et al., 2009). In
addition to tools like the KINDL-R, Lippman et al. (2011) developed a comprehensive conceptual framework which delineated constructs, indicators, and possible measures for positive child well-being. A description of the positive indicator of child-well-being framework is discussed in the next section (Lippman et al., 2011). Specific attention is given to the school and educational domains, as these areas are relevant to our discussion on child well-being for preschool-aged Black boys.

**Positive Indicators of Child Well-Being in the Educational Domain**

In 2011, Lippman et al. developed the child well-being positive indicator conceptual framework (see Appendix A). This framework is rooted in elements of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and highlights various factors which impact a child’s development. Within this framework, considerations for child well-being include the individual child, their relationships, and contexts in which children are likely to grow and develop (Lippman et al., 2011). Each category consists of domains and constructs, indicators of those constructs, and sources for extant measures (Lippman et al., 2011). For example, within the individual category there is a domain for cognitive development and education. This domain is comprised of constructs which include academic self-concept, and school engagement (see Table 1). Based on the framework, positive indicators of a child’s academic self-concept are captured by the child’s self-perception of his academic performance and ability (Lippman et al., 2011). These indicators are then measured using such tools as “Health Behaviors in School-Age Children” [HBSC], (WHO, 2007). Similarly, within the relational and contextual categories, there are five domains that include family, peers, school, community, and the broader macrosystems, such as a child’s culture (Lippman et al., 2011). Accordingly, within the relationship category, the school domain outlines the relationship with his teacher as a construct;
thus, an indicator of relational well-being may be captured by a child’s report of feeling, supported by his teacher (Lippman et al., 2011).

**Table 1**

*Positive Indicators of Child Well-Being Framework Specific to the School and Educational Domains*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>(Pre) Academic self-concept</td>
<td>Self-perception of (pre) academic ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School engagement</td>
<td>Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive relationships with teachers</td>
<td>Child’s report of teacher support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Positive engagement and Connection</td>
<td>Sense of belonging and peer acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Safe in school</td>
<td>Safe from bullying, discrimination, and crime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although the child well-being positive indicator framework has enhanced previous work by adding relationships and broadening the perspective on relevant contexts, this framework must also include the voice of children as informants of their own well-being, instead of adults (Lippman et al., 2011). The creators of this conceptual framework acknowledged age specifications as a required consideration for child well-being within each construct and outlined the need to apply this framework with diverse social and cultural groups (Lippman et al., 2011).
Collectively, these considerations highlight the need for broadening the scope and use of the positive indicator of child well-being framework.

**Filling in the Gaps**

In recent years there has been increased emphasis on the subjective aspect of well-being. Davis et al. (2006) suggested, unlike functional measures that might be used to assess what a child can or cannot do, child well-being relates more specifically to how a child feels about an experience. In a study on the relationship between play and well-being for preschool age children (i.e., ranging from ages 4 to 6 years old), Kennedy-Behr et al. (2015) found parents’ ratings of perceptions of their child’s school experience were higher than the child’s report of the experience, particularly in relation to self-esteem. These findings suggest a need for increased efforts to solicit and examine first-hand information from young children. Including children as active participants in developing their experiences of well-being is possible when creative and developmentally appropriate strategies are used (Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015).

The positive indicator framework contributed to a new shift in the research community which emphasized the need to identify ways children flourished and thrived, rather than focusing solely on eliminating negative consequences (Ben-Arieh, 2008). There are relevant considerations for understanding child well-being that must account for the experience of children from different racial and ethnic groups. One example is the integrative model for developmental competencies of minority children [integrative model] (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). This framework included considerations for the context within which a child develops and acknowledges the collective impact of identity and social position variables, such as age, race, and gender, in the development of young children (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).
Drawing from Lippman et al.’s. (2011) conceptual framework and using life course theory as a complimentary theory, I examined the individual, relational, and contextual categories of child well-being within the educational domain. Utilizing the child well-being framework as a guide, this study explored the subjective experiences of four preschool age Black boys with their teacher in a state-funded program. Understanding their experiences within this early learning context required attending to the child’s school engagement, relationships with teachers, feelings of safety, and sense of belonging in school (Lippman et al., 2011). The individual, contextual, and relational considerations of child well-being specific to Black preschool boys are discussed in the text to follow.

**Individual Considerations of Child Well-Being**

A child’s social and emotional well-being shapes their relational experiences, how they feel about themselves, their approaches to learning, and sense of belonging in school (National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine [NRCIM], 2000). Since all children are unique, considerations for individual aspects of child well-being suggest race, age, ability, and gender all create heterogeneity within and across groups of children and should also be acknowledged in research (Fattore et al., 2012; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). For Black preschool boys educated in state-funded programs, the intersection of race, age, and gender converge to create a particularly unique narrative. In addition, their identities are also shaped by outward ideas of what it means to be a Black boy (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). This intersection required special attention within the educational context, as Black boys have historically been misunderstood (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2008). An intersectional perspective contends the identities of being a boy, being Black, and being 4 years old, are not additive or separate, rather they must be collectively addressed (May, 2015). It is through this integrated lens I propose an exploration of the
individual characteristics of Black preschool boys and their experience of child well-being. This lens acknowledges their race, age, and gender as significant in their educational experiences of well-being.

**Race**

Given race and culture are distinct—race is based on skin color and culture is a factor of socialization—for the purpose of this study, the term *Black* is used to designate boys who are both racially Black and of African ancestry (NBCDI, 2015). It is important those charged with fostering their well-being acknowledge the negative perceptions of Black boys and their behaviors which are prevalent in society, even for very young boys (Davis, 2003; Wright & Counsell, 2018). At times, developmentally appropriate preschool behaviors such as hitting, biting, or having tantrums are often adultified and criminalized when exhibited by preschoolers who are Black (Wright et al., 2017). This is in part due to negative stereotypes that exist and perpetuated in society, and the media about Black boys and men (Rowley et al., 2014). Racial considerations of child well-being for Black preschool boys also require educators acknowledge common negative perceptions that exist within society yet be intentional about working to counter these perceptions (Nelson, 2016). Such practices include affirming and celebrating the historical and cultural aspects of being Black, as well as fostering pride in who they are as individuals, rather than seeking to compare, neutralize, or assimilate Black preschool boys to mainstream culture (Wright & Counsell, 2018).

Individual considerations for child well-being should also reflect creating opportunities for Black preschool boys to see images of themselves represented positively in the classroom (Bryan, 2017; Wright & Counsell, 2018). This may mean Black preschool boys have consistent exposure to books, literature, pictures, and media in which they can see themselves represented
or mirrored (Bishop, 1990) as able, brilliant, and loved. For a Black child, a mirror book is one in which the main characters are Black children who are reflected and seen in positive and affirming roles (Bishop, 1990). Examples might include books like *Little Legends: Exceptional Men in Black History* or *Full, Full, Full of Love*, in which Black boys see themselves mirrored or reflected positively in literature. This contrasts with window books, in which young boys are constantly looking at books of other children or characters who do not reflect their history, race, or ethnicity (Bishop, 1990). Additionally, experiencing the presence of consistent peers and or adults who are Black and demonstrate excellence in a variety of ways, including strong academic and preacademic skills, also fosters well-being for young Black boys (Howard et al., 2013; Wright & Counsell, 2018).

Age

Throughout this text, I appropriately refer to the preschool participants and those within this developmental stage of ages 3 through 5 as preschool “boys.” Considerations for child well-being require our practices be anchored in framing and contextualizing our boys as “children”—not “little men,” or other personifications of adulthood. Recognizing this nurture-dependent, stage of development (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) for preschool age Black boys allows teachers to focus their practice on implementing developmentally appropriate methods which will foster and enrich opportunities for Black boys to learn, grow, and develop.

A widely held theory on human development suggests children will encounter and resolve challenges in each stage of development (Erickson, 1985). During the preschool developmental stage of ages 3 to 5 years old, well-being is achieved, when a young child can execute tasks and work in collaboration with peers and adults in his environment (Erickson, 1985). There are a broad range of expectations for children at various stages of preschool
development (Dodge et al., 2010), and some widely held expectations for the typically developing 4-year-old preschool child (New Jersey Department of Education [NJDOE], 2014). A child at this age is able to distinguish between real and pretend, understand pictures and symbols represent real things, and is also able to understand simple abstract language ideas like “later,” “soon,” “bigger,” and “less” (Dodge et al., 2010). The vocabulary for a typically developing child at this age may include a range of up to 1,000 words and incorporate complex sentences to make up stories about their thoughts (Dodge et al., 2010).

**Gender**

There are also unique learning needs of younger Black boys that differ from girls and other non-Black males (Howard et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2007). These needs may include a preference for cooperative learning arrangements (Boykin et al., 2006), as well as hands-on learning and physical activities (Morhard, 2013; Sampson, 2010). Researchers have suggested boys and girls may demonstrate gender-specific interests and behavioral preferences (i.e., boys are drawn more to gross motor related activities like playing with blocks, while girls are more likely to engage in play that enhances fine motor skills or verbal skills (Ruble et al., as cited in Early et al., 2010). Promoting child well-being for preschool Black boys requires teachers to foster an environment where young boys feel safe to explore and pursue various kinds of activities and interests (Bryan, 2019; Dodge et al., 2010). Within this context, considerations for helping to foster and encourage child-driven interests required teachers take time to reflect on their own ideas about what it means to be a boy or girl and their assumptions about the kinds of play boys may like (Dodge et al., 2010). In addition, teachers are also called to reflect on how their experiences or lack thereof, and biases regarding Black boys or men, may hinder their engagement with young learners (Bryan, 2019; Wright & Counsell, 2018).
Acknowledging the race, gender, and age of each child and the collective influence of this identity on his preschool experience, enhances our understanding of child well-being for Black preschool boys. Individual considerations of child well-being for preschool Black boys must also consider and affirm their unique identities and lived experiences (Wright & Counsell, 2018). Knowing and understanding individual differences in temperaments, interests, racial, or cultural backgrounds will allow children to develop and learn in a supportive and nurturing environment (Dodge et al., 2010). Acknowledging within group heterogeneity increases the richness and complexity of the child well-being framework for Black preschool boys.

**Relational Considerations of Child Well-Being: Teacher-Child Relationships**

Relationships are a significant factor in a child’s individual development and young children need secure attachments to thrive (Fattore et al., 2009; Marks et al., 2015). Experiencing positive and nurturing relationships help to build social skills and foster academic success (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Lippman et al., 2011). Namely, supportive early relationships are a critical first step for a young child’s safety and survival (NRCIM, 2000); increased persistence, engagement, and positive attitudes toward school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; CDCHU, 2015).

The quality of the teacher-child relationship was found to be a strong indicator of school success during the initial years of school (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009). For preschoolers, high-quality instruction and close teacher-child relationships were the best predictors of increased academic outcomes (Howes et al., 2008). A teacher’s ability to engage in integrated hands-on play activities with children served an essential role for enriching a child’s learning in the preschool classroom (Early et al., 2010). Positive learning relationships are especially beneficial for teaching children who may present with various academic challenges (Noguera, 2008).
Race and gender are factors which may influence teacher-child relationships (Howes & Shivers, 2006; Wood et al., 2017). Given the importance of this relationship for academic outcomes and child well-being, it is essential for teachers to consider how a child’s race and their perceptions about specific racial or ethnic groups might influence their interactions with young children. Teachers must also consider how their relationships, treatment, or interactions with specific children based on race or gender may potentially influence how other children in the class relate to that child (Bryan, 2017). To support well-being for Black preschool boys, teachers must first become aware of the social and oppressive structures that exist for Black boys in society and the educational context (Nelson, 2016). In addition, educators are simultaneously called to question the prevailing deficit-based narratives that exist in society, the educational context, and may begin to develop within the boys themselves (Reichert & Hawley, 2014).

**Contextual Considerations of Child Well-Being: The Physical Space**

Within the positive indicator child well-being framework, there is a focus on the interaction between the child, his context, and how this dynamic may influence his school experience (Lippman et al., 2011). Children are influenced by their environments and the most significant environments are family and school (NRCIM, 2000). School environments represent several interrelated parts which play a role in a child’s overall experience (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A range of contextual factors including family life and the demands of the classroom environment were linked to variation in the early transition patterns of Black preschool boys (Iruka, Gardner-Neblett, et al., 2014). A child’s engagement within his environment and his relationship with others in that environment are critical aspects of a child’s contextual experience of well-being in preschool. This interplay has implications for young children learning preacademic and social-emotional skills (Williford et al., 2013).
Considerations for classroom’s physical space, culture, and environment have implications for how young children may experience well-being in school (Early et al., 2010). Studies have linked global classroom quality to children’s outcomes (Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). Findings indicate having engaging materials in combination with teachers who provide sensitive nurturing instruction, is associated with significant gains in academic and social skills in preschool (Early et al., 2010). State-funded preschool classrooms in Newark, New Jersey implemented Creative Curriculum (Dodge et al., 2010). This play-based curriculum organized the physical environment into various areas and centers such as blocks, dramatic play, toys and games, art area, library area, sand and water play, music and movement, cooking, computer, and outdoor gross motor (Dodge et al., 2010). The physical environment has a powerful effect on individual children (Dodge et al., 2010), subsequently the teacher’s role in preparing the environment is to ensure children can experience child well-being through engagement in a safe, interactive, developmentally appropriate activities that promote hands-on learning (NAEYC, 2009; NJDOE, 2015). This is accomplished by maintaining a well-organized classroom learning environment where children can feel safe and develop independence and autonomy in discovering and making choices, while fostering responsibility (Dodge et al., 2010; NJDOE, 2015). The capacity and willingness of a preschool teacher to provide access and engagement in the physical space through room arrangement, supplies, furnishings, and various interest areas, are important considerations for how Black preschool boys may experience well-being through the practices of their teachers.

**Summary**

Child well-being is viewed as an ever-evolving process through which a child’s individual characteristics, relationships, and contexts are continuously interacting. This dynamic
process converges to meet the child’s needs, augment resources, and enrich relationships with
the world around him (New Economics Foundation [NEF], 2009). Child well-being for young
children in school is heavily reliant on various aspects of their relationships with their teachers.
These factors include their teacher’s ability to know and understand each child’s individual and
relational needs and strengths. In addition, a preschool teacher’s capacity to facilitate and engage
young Black boys through developmentally appropriate practices are critical factors for
enhancing their school experiences (Brown & Lee, 2012). A review of the literature to follow
outline the need to incorporate a life course perspective and extend the positive indicator
framework for child well-being. This extension should include considerations for race, age,
gender, and contexts, in order to explore and understand the factors which influence the positive
relational experiences of well-being for Black boys in state-funded preschool programs.

Literature Review

If there is to be truly a humane, plague-free community in this country, it must be one
responsive to increasing numbers of life-stories, to more and more “different” voices.
Yes, many of the shapes are alike; there are tonalities that resemble one another, that
merge. But there are differing nuances, shimmering contours; no one exactly duplicates
any other. This is what ought to be attended to, even as we resonate to what is common,
what is shared. (Greene, 1993, p. 218)

The quest to share the stories of the educational experiences of Black boys in preschool
cauised me to reflect on why their stories were so important. Many scholars had previously
engaged older Black boys in conversations about their strengths, resilience, and important
protective factors which helped them to move past educational inequities (Harper & Davis, 2012;
Howard, 2001). Other inquiries focused on the relationships Black boys in early adolescence had
with their teachers (Nelson, 2016). There was also literature which examined the relational challenges Black preschool boys experienced with their teachers (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Howes & Shivers, 2006). However, there was limited research which focused on positive development for Black preschool boys (Durden & Curenton, 2017; Iruka, Winn, et al., 2014; Wright & Counsell, 2018). In addition, I encountered no research to date which specifically engaged Black preschool boys within state-funded programs, in conversations about their child-teacher relational experiences. Given the critical importance of the first 5 years of a child’s life, the benefits of early childhood programs (NJDOE, 2014), combined with ongoing disparities Black males experienced across the educational continuum, I was perplexed by the lack of focus in the research community on the subjective accounts of relational experiences during the early years of the educational journey.

**Perspective**

Reflections on the current state of Black men in the United States caused me to ponder on the Black boys and men both in and outside my sphere of influence. Their stories and experiences are all unique and different, yet similar. Many had achieved success by societal standards, some were still on the journey and overcoming obstacles, the youngest of whom were just starting out, struggling to be seen as children. I considered the legacy of former President Barack Obama and his path to success. I contemplated the hope, pride, expectation, and possibility he did and continues to represent for many Black boys and men. I also considered the path for 12-year-old Tamir Rice who was serving an out-of-school suspension the day he was fatally shot (Bryan, 2020). His infraction was for reportedly playing the “staring game” with a peer in his class who reported feeling intimidated (Townes, 2015). Both their legacies tied together by race and gender yet distinctly different in critical ways.
The reality is Black males contend with challenges at all levels of the educational continuum (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Rowley et al., 2014). Despite obstacles and threats to their educational attainment, many succeed in school (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Harper & Davis, 2012). Although education and school can serve as a vehicle for achievement and economic viability, it was difficult to separate the impact of societal influence on the school experiences of Black boys and men (Bryan, 2017; Davis, 2003; Wright & Counsell, 2018). I also questioned the role of significant early relationships and attachments in creating a sense of belonging within the educational context. Relationships and the current influence of macrolevel trends such as immigration sweeps, mass incarceration, increasingly acceptable racist rhetoric, and racial polarity, helped to frame and contextualize my understanding of why Black children continue to experience challenges within the educational system (Staats et al., 2017). I also questioned the impact of prolonged exposure to educational inequity over time (Gee et al., 2019).

Throughout my doctoral studies, I explored various theories of human development. However, it was life course theory which most resonated and adequately positioned me to understand the literature on Black boys and men in our society. This theoretical framework helped contextualize the critical impact of the early educational years, both from a developmental and relational perspective. The foundational principles of life course theory kept pointing me back to the beginning as a means of better understanding later years within the educational context for Black boys and men. I was clear my perspective needed to be strength-based rather than deficit-focused. In addition, my goal was to inquire and learn about what worked. In tandem with this inquiry on positive development, it was no longer acceptable to ask significant others. I compared this perspective to a physician asking a parent if the child felt better rather than directly asking the patient who was present (Howard, 2001). My exploration of
the subjective nature of well-being prompted me to examine the child well-being positive indicator framework (Lippman et al., 2011) as part of my exploration. This brought an increased sense of balance and complexity to the narratives of each child, in my attempt to understand the personal, relational, and contextual nature of well-being for each boy.

Review of the Literature on Preschool and Black Boys During the Early Years

I conducted a general subject search of “child well-being defined” within peer reviewed, journal articles from 2009 to 2019. This initial search yielded 1,322 articles from Academic Search Complete, Complementary Index, Directory of Open Access Journals, Education Research Complete, and Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC). This list was reduced to 254 articles to include only those with children as the subjects. Twenty peer-reviewed articles from national and international sources aimed at obtaining a comprehensive working definition of child well-being for younger children were reviewed. The databases were also supplemented with online site searches of relevant journals and a review of the reference lists of each article.

A second systematic review of electronic empirical, peer-reviewed journal articles was conducted using the ERIC, Education Research Complete, Social Sciences database, PsyInfo, and Educational Complete databases with date parameters between 2009-2019. The search terms used were “early childhood education and Black children,” which yielded 115 results. An additional search of “African American boys and early childhood” yielded 290 results. Additional cross-referencing searches included “Black boys or males and education,” “Black boys and well-being and preschool,” “Black boys and teachers and well-being,” “African American boys and preschool and well-being,” “African American boys and early childhood and well-being,” and “African American boys and education.” The initial list was further reduced to include United States only locations involving preschool education. This search was also
supplemented with online site searches of relevant journals and a review of reference lists of each article. The final 16 articles were then reviewed for methods and findings and grouped into four broad categories of literature: state-funded preschools, Black boys during the preschool years, child well-being, and teacher-child relationships. These articles were reviewed and analyzed for common trends and patterns related to the educational experiences of younger Black children. A later search for relevant literature related to research with preschool children and narrative inquiry was also conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of extant literature and support claims for the significance of this study.

The literature review is divided into sections which outline the beginnings of early childhood programs in the United States, the current preschool context, experiences for younger Black boys, and the relational experiences of Black boys within the early learning years. Additional attention is also given to the literature related to the subjective reports of school experiences for Black boys and men across the educational continuum and exploring their strengths.

**Foundation for Preschool Programs**

The head start program began in the 1960s with a goal of helping to end the cycle of poverty, by providing holistic programs for preschool children from low-income families (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). The basic premise of this program was to reduce the risk of school failure, teen pregnancy, and involvement in the criminal justice system, by improving the early development for children living in poverty (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Head start helped to lay the foundation for early childhood programs designed to meet the emotional, social, health, and psychological needs of children and communities in culturally responsive ways (Pungello et al.,
As decades passed, the merits of early childhood education were repeatedly documented as increasingly relevant for future educational success (Pungello et al., 2010).

Benefits of early childhood programs were validated through two groundbreaking studies (Muennig et al., 2009; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), which laid the foundation for the advantages of early childhood education for all children. The Perry Preschool Project was conducted between 1962 and 1967. The goal of this study was to assess the outcomes of providing high-quality preschool education to 3- and 4-year-old children living in a poverty-stricken community in Ypsilanti, Michigan (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). The sample in this study consisted of 123 Black children who were between the ages of 3 and 4 years old and received 2.5 hours of preschool during the weekday from a certified teacher with a bachelor’s degree (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). Another relevant study was the Abecedarian Project, a longitudinal study which included 111 children from North Carolina who were at risk for developmental delays between 1972 and 1985 (Ramey & Campbell, 1984). Ninety-eight percent of the children in this sample were Black, 57 of whom received 6 to 8 hours of high-quality childcare for 5 days per week, from approximately 4 months to 5 years of age (Ramey & Campbell, 1984). Findings from both studies are still ongoing and have shown long-term benefits, such as increases in math and reading achievement, reduction in the likelihood of teen pregnancy, and an increase in the likelihood of college attainment (Pungello et al., 2010).

**Current State of Preschool**

Currently, there are approximately 1.5 million 3- and 4-year-old children attending state-funded preschool programs across the nation (NIEER, 2015). Given the evidence high-quality preschool benefits all children, an increasing number of states across the country have expanded their universal preschool programs (NIEER, 2015). A state-funded preschool program is
financed, supervised, and directed by the state to provide a group learning experience for 3- and 4-year-old children at least 2 days per week (NIEER, 2015). Children who attend high-quality preschools have better health and cognitive outcomes and are less likely to utilize special education services, or be retained in school (NIEER, 2015; Pungello et al., 2010). Attending a high-quality preschool program has also been linked to increased high school graduation, college attendance, and decreased involvement with the criminal justice system (Muennig et al., 2009; Pungello et al., 2010; Ramey & Campbell, 1984). In addition, the quality of a child’s early childhood experiences were impacted by factors such as preschool setting, curriculum quality, and teacher beliefs (Early et al., 2010).

**Black Boys in Preschool**

The current literature on Black boys during the preschool years reflect the reality that they begin to experience educational challenges as early as the second half of their preschool year, before transitioning into kindergarten (Barbarin, 2013). Black boys are also negatively impacted by teacher ratings of social and academic competence (Downer et al., 2016), and subsequently experience disproportionate suspension and expulsion practices (Gilliam et al., 2016; DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014; see Figure 1). The data in Figure 1 is part of a comprehensive report from the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, which captured the percentages of preschool children who were suspended one or more times. The percentages were delineated by race and ethnicity, then compared to the total enrollment of preschool children. Of the three largest populations, White, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American, 43% of the children enrolled in preschool programs across the nation were White, 29% were Hispanic or Latino, and 18% were Black or African American (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). A review of the preschool suspension rosters showed 42% of the
preschoolers suspended were Black or African American, 26% were White, and 25% were Hispanic or Latino (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). According to this data, although Black preschool children represented only 18% of the total preschool enrollment across the nation, they constituted 42% of the preschool children who experienced an out of school suspension and 48% of the preschool children who experienced multiple out-of-school suspensions. These results indicate Black preschool children are almost 3 times more likely to be suspended from preschool (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014).

This data reflected, Black children across the nation were disproportionately pushed out of preschool settings before their fifth birthday (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Given the precariousness of their newly developing sense of self at the ages of 3 and 4 (CDCHU, 2015; NAEYC, 2009), these findings were disturbing. If these trends persisted, Black children might be unable to reap the benefits of preschool education (NIEER, 2015). Protecting these educational benefits for all young children are crucial. Furthermore, the initial studies (i.e., Abecedarian Project and Perry Preschool Project) which helped lay the foundation for early childhood programs in the United States, involved sample populations comprised of predominantly Black preschool children (Muennig et al., 2009; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). Paradoxically, over 50 years later, Black children, specifically young Black boys, were being disproportionately expelled and excluded from preschool programs (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014).

Although there has been legislation in place which makes it illegal to suspend or expel a preschool child (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2014), some schools and preschool programs have routinely engaged in practices such as soft suspensions or expulsions (Gilliam et al., 2016; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). These practices entail sending young children home prematurely without official documentation or informing families the school is not equipped to
meet the needs of the child (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Protecting the benefits of early childhood education are instrumental for the educational success of Black boys (NBCDI, 2015; Rashid, 2009). The capacity of these early educational experiences to shape identity development, warrants increased efforts to establish positive early encounters. Additional, work is needed to prevent young boys from becoming “social casualties” (Davis, as cited in Wright & Counsell, 2018) of educational environments, ill-equipped to support their needs (p. x). A closer look at the literature on the relational experiences of Black boys outlined critical factors which impact the educational experiences for Black boys in preschool.

**Figure 1**

*National Percentage of Preschool Suspensions by Child’s Race and Ethnicity*

Relational Experiences

To contextualize the relationships young Black boys experience in preschool, it is important to consider societal influences such as race and gender and the impact these factors have on the interactions teachers have with young Black boys. These interactions also influence teacher ratings of a child’s competencies and preacademic skills (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Downer et al., 2016; Ewing & Taylor, 2009). Collectively, this layered and complex exploration of the teacher-child relationship points toward a more comprehensive understanding of the preschool experience for Black boys.

Race and Relationships

Implicit bias may influence an educator’s disciplinary practices toward Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). Distinct from explicit bias which is conscious, implicit bias refers to an unconscious thought or belief that affects decisions (Staats et al., 2017). The National Public Radio segment entitled “Bias Isn’t Just a Police Problem It’s a Preschool Problem,” highlighted the 2016 Yale Child Study research from Gilliam et al. This study illustrated how implicit bias was linked to teacher beliefs regarding Black preschool children. In this study, participants of various races recruited from an early childhood conference were told to watch a recording of four preschool children and find challenging behaviors although there were no actual challenging behaviors present (Gilliam et al., 2016). The participants’ eye gazes were tracked as they viewed a video of two Black children and two White children, one from each gender and race (Gilliam et al., 2016). Researchers found, when looking for challenging behaviors, teachers gazed longer at Black children, especially Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016).

For the participants of this study, there were also contextual and relational factors that impacted teacher ratings of a child’s behavior. Specifically, when teachers received knowledge
of a child’s family background, negative ratings of the child’s behavior decreased. However, these differences were only noted when the teacher and child were from the same racial group (Gilliam et al., 2016). When the teacher and child were from the same race, knowledge of the child’s family background and situation resulted in fewer negative ratings compared to instances where there was a mismatch in race (Gilliam et al., 2016). This study reinforced previous findings of DOE Office of Civil Rights (2014), which suggested even very young Black boys may experience a type of “behavior profiling” (Gilliam et al., 2016), as early as preschool. These findings also underscore the need for teachers, regardless of race, to develop stronger relationships with young children and integrate knowledge of their family backgrounds to improve interactions with young children and their families (Gilliam et al., 2016).

**Race, Gender, and Competence**

The influence of race and gender on teacher rating and interactions with young children has been replicated in several studies (Graves & Howes, 2011; Howes, 2000; Wood et al., 2017). Wood et al. (2017) compared teacher ratings of interactions with Black boys in kindergarten to their rating of interactions with White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and multiethnic peers. Findings revealed teachers perceived less closeness and more external challenging behaviors for Black boys than reported for their White and multiethnic peers (Wood et al., 2017). Graves and Howes (2011) found prekindergarten teachers rated boys significantly higher on behavioral problems and lower in social competence than girls. The closeness of the teacher and child relationship was found to be an important factor in categorizing behaviors. Specifically, when teachers experienced close relationships with young children, they were less likely to describe the child’s behaviors as challenging (Graves & Howes, 2011).
A child’s competencies during the early years are heavily reliant on the teacher’s ratings and perceptions (Bates & Glick, 2013; Wood et al., 2017). Teacher’s perceptions of a child can influence how that child is rated across various developmental domains (Downer et al., 2016). Researchers found when the teacher and child are of the same racial or ethnic background, boys showed no significant differences in behavioral concerns or competence (Downer et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017). In other studies (Bates & Glick, 2013; Downer et al., 2016), the teacher-child racial match was also a critical factor in assessment ratings for young Black children. Namely, Downer et al. (2016) found White teachers gave lower assessment ratings than African American teachers of literacy and language skills to African American children at the start of their preschool year. In general, teacher ratings of competence and relational closeness were found to be higher when there was a racial match between the teacher and child (Graves & Howes, 2011). Collectively, these studies suggest that Black children are likely to receive lower competency ratings from teachers who are from a different race. In addition, Black boys are consistently perceived to be challenging, rated as having lower competencies, and are also perceived as having less relational closeness by their teachers (Wood et al., 2017).

**Challenging Trajectories**

Walden and Losen (2003) identified the “preschool to prison pipeline” as the phenomena responsible for achievement challenges in early grades and the subsequent disproportionately high federal and state prison rates for Black males in America (p. 11). Rashid (2009) further distinguished the early childhood period as an instrumental period in the developmental trajectory for Black males. He contended it is during these crucial early years that Black boys take a downward turn along the developmental pathway and are often transformed from what he called “brilliant babies” to “children placed at risk” (Boykin, as cited in Rashid, 2009, p. 347).
Research specific to Black preschool boys making transitions during the early years also points to declines in teacher ratings of functioning as early as the second half of their preschool year (Barbarin, 2013; Iruka, Gardner-Neblett et al., 2014). Barbarin (2013) examined the socioemotional learning patterns of Black boys at various points in preschool and after kindergarten. Barbarin (2013) found teachers rated boys in general as competent in socioemotional development and teacher-child relationships. However, declines in competency ratings were noted as the same boys got older and transitioned to kindergarten (Barbarin, 2013). A later study with Downer et al. (2016) also reported an increase in teacher ratings of problem behaviors for African American boys, as they transitioned from the Fall to Spring of their preschool year. The increase in negative ratings and lower competency ratings from teachers as Black preschool boys get older, highlights the critical need for tools to improve, support, and strengthen this relational bond.

**Summary of Early Relational Experiences for Black Boys**

A review of the literature suggest, as Black boys transition in early childhood settings, their relational challenges increase. These challenges are further exacerbated when the teacher’s race or ethnicity does not match the child’s (Graves & Howes, 2011). Subsequently, both social and preacademic competency ratings for very young Black children may vary according to the teacher’s race. Given most minority children are taught by teachers from different racial or ethnic groups (Bates & Glick, 2013; DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014) and teacher perceptions play an important role in evaluating academic performances, it is important to consider how a teacher’s negative perceptions may contribute to perpetuating academic performance gaps for Black children (Bates & Glick, 2013). Further exploration of the impact of race on a young child’s overall experience is warranted, particularly during the early years. Although the
perceptions and opinions of teachers have been a focal point in the teacher-child relational dyad, more research is required to explore the perceptions, thoughts, and opinions of the child as a significant and relevant participant in that relationship.

**Amplifying a Forgotten Voice**

Educational accounts have often focused on the voice of significant others. The perspectives of parents, teachers, administrators, and support staff such as guidance counselors and social workers have been examined and esteemed in the literature as it relates to Black boys and men across the educational continuum (Brown & Lee, 2012; Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Howard et al., 2013; Rowley et al., 2014). Opportunities for children to share their opinions of how teachers and their practices impact their school experience are critical but lacking in educational research (Howard, 2001; Patrick et al., 2011; Wright & Counsell, 2018).

Few scholars have engaged Black boys and men as collaborators in generating knowledge regarding their educational experiences (Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2001; Nelson, 2016). Gathering knowledge from young men the latter end of the educational continuum, researchers presented counter-narratives of Black college undergraduates regarding their educational aspirations, experiences, and concerns (Harper & Davis, 2012). As this study revealed, although older Black males attending college were aware of the educational inequities that existed within institutions of higher learning, they still viewed education as a viable means of upward mobility and had goals of pursuing even higher education, despite the challenges (Harper & Davis, 2012). Nelson (2016) later examined the relational experiences of Black boys in middle school based on their interactions with teachers. According to the boys, effective teaching practice evolved from the teacher’s ability to contextualize boys’ behaviors, without compromising their expectations (Nelson, 2016). Based on the students’ voices, relational
teaching was instrumental in helping Black boys reach their academic potential. Key elements of relational teaching required educators to identify commonalities with students, overcome resistance, and incorporate nontraditional (i.e., afterschool sports or community visits) methods of connecting with students and their families (Nelson, 2016).

In an earlier study, Howard (2001) spoke with Black elementary school students to understand their viewpoints of their teacher’s efforts to implement culturally relevant practices. Findings from this study revealed Black elementary school students were primarily focused on having teachers who they felt cared for them (Howard, 2001). Specifically, when teachers were positive and nurturing towards students, it increased their motivation to do well in school (Howard, 2001). During an additional study with younger children Patrick et al. (2011) engaged kindergarteners in discussions about the conversations they had with their parents on the topic of school. This was one of few studies that highlighted the perspectives of children as young as 5 years old on school related subject matter. Patrick et al. (2011) concluded kindergarteners were able to give accurate accounts of their conversations with their parents. In 2016, Reichert and Nelson engaged boys and their teachers from multiple countries in conversations regarding the strengths and challenges of their relational experiences. Boys in kindergarten through third grade reported being positively impacted by teachers who allowed them to engage in desired activities, helped them to learn, and showed they cared (Reichert & Nelson, 2016). Collectively, these studies underscore the ability of children across the developmental continuum to share their subjective accounts of relational experiences with their teachers. More specifically Black boys of various ages highlighted the importance of experiencing a caring, supportive relationship as a contributing factor for their academic success (Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2001; Nelson, 2016). In addition, when given a voice, older
Black students consistently revealed their value of education, despite the awareness of educational inequities (Harper & Davis, 2012).

**Building on Strengths**

Few studies have focused exclusively on the positive experiences of Black children in the state-funded preschool context (Brown & Lee, 2012; Iruka, Winn et al., 2014). Individual, family, and social supports were identified as three categories of protective factors related to resilience for young children (Aratani et al., 2011). Consistent with this finding, Iruka, Winn et al. (2014) examined factors associated with high preacademic skills for young Black boys. Researchers in this study discovered high-achieving Black preschool boys were significantly different from average and low achieving Black boys in the areas of family, preschool, and individual characteristics and behaviors (Iruka, Winn et al., 2014). Specifically, Black boys from households with higher incomes, who were older, and had a literacy enriched preschool environment, showed higher preacademic skills (Iruka, Winn et al., 2014). However, these strengths were only observed while the boys were in preschool before transitioning to kindergarten (Barbarin, 2013; Iruka, Gardner-Neblett et al., 2014). Additional research is warranted to capture the individual and or collective benefits of supportive factors and subjective accounts within the preschool environment (Iruka, Winn et al., 2014).

Recent literature from Davis and Farran (2018) emphasized the benefits of promoting high quality math experiences for Black boys attending urban preschools. Preschool teachers can encourage math experiences for Black boys by facilitating individual interactions and exploration, expanding the child’s interest, and creating a classroom environment which fosters learning math (Davis & Farran, 2018). Davis and Farran (2018) also asserted early math knowledge supported the development of executive functioning skills and later school success.
As most Black boys are educated in large, urban districts (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015), it is important to understand their positive experiences of well-being in these settings. Capturing the specific contextual elements that promote well-being from the perspective of young Black boys who attend these programs, may further foster best practices and increase engagement for Black preschool boys.

**Summary of the Extant Literature**

Four key findings emerge from the literature on Black boys during the early educational years. First, younger Black boys may face a myriad of relational obstacles including negative perceptions and implicit bias which threaten their school success at the start of their educational journey (Bates & Glick, 2013; Gilliam et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017). Second, the teacher-child relationship is a critical area of influence on developmental outcomes for Black boys (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Graves & Howes, 2011; Wood et al., 2017). Specifically, this relationship influences teacher’s perceptions of behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016), competency ratings (Bates & Glick, 2013) ratings of academic ability (Downer et al., 2016; Hargrove & Sealy, 2011) and perceived closeness (Wood et al., 2017). Third, although the voices of young children are often missing in educational research (Patrick et al., 2011), they are able and willing to share their experiences when developmentally appropriate opportunities are made available (Katz et al., 2017). Finally, there is limited research highlighting optimal development and experiences of child well-being for Black boys in the state-funded preschool context (Iruka, Winn et al., 2014; Wright & Counsell, 2018). This lack of research also emphasizes the need to gather child-centered perspectives regarding how this relationship may enhance the educational experiences for young Black boys. To fill these gaps in research, the current study explored the positive
relational experiences Black preschool boys in state-funded preschool programs had with their teachers.

Black boys and men experience a myriad of relational challenges within the educational realm. A life course perspective was used to highlight the importance of time and context, celebrating the power of relationships to enhance optimal development for young children (Hutchison, 2005). Incorporating the complimentary child well-being positive indicator framework, yielded a simultaneous exploration of the ways a young boy’s preschool experience may be enriched through his teacher-child relationship. Collectively these perspectives underscored interconnected relationships as a critical foundation of the human experience (Elder et al., 2003) and a pivotal source of change. Key principles of life course theory direct this inquiry towards an awareness of social and relational contexts and timing of events. The next section details narrative inquiry research design as the methodological approach used to explore the relational experiences of preschool boys through constructing and telling their stories.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology section entails four distinct components. I first describe the unique elements of narrative inquiry research approach and why it was selected as a way to understand the lived experiences of Black preschool boys with their teachers. Next, I outline the research processes by which I selected a school and participants, as well as the methods I used to generate and analyze the data. I then discuss ethical considerations for working with young children. Finally, before sharing the findings, I provide important contextual information to the reader about the state-funded preschool program at Glenside Elementary School (pseudonym) in New Jersey. These methods and processes are all focused on answering the research question: In what ways do Black boys in state-funded preschool programs experience child well-being practices from their teachers?

Narrative Inquiry Design

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology used to examine and understand experience through telling a story (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Pioneered in the 1980s, this framework is rooted in the work of Dewey (1938) on experience and in particular his identified three dimensions of experience: relational, temporal, and contextual. As Dewey emphasized, these aspects of may prove to be instructional if they are purposely explored.

If I am honest, I have to say, when I selected narrative inquiry methodology, it was with some naiveté about the depth and intentionality this form of analysis demands of a researcher. My goal was to amplify the often-silenced voices of Black boys in state-funded preschool programs by sharing stories of their experiences with their teachers. Although I realized I could tell their stories, narrative methodology is not simply about telling stories of experiences; more accurately, narrative inquiry requires a deliberate and intentional kind of wakefulness to time,
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relationships, and contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This research lens necessitated I consistently stay alert to these different perspectives as I inquired about the experiences of my young participants. To solicit an understanding of a child’s life and the meaning he gives to his lived experiences, both research methods and my posture as a researcher must invite this process. Narrative methodology is unique from other forms of qualitative research in its inception, procedural, and analytical considerations (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). As I began my research, it was important for me to consider justifying my research in three distinct ways.

**Justifiable Entry: Positionality**

At the start of the inquiry, narrative inquirers are tasked with justifying their personal, practical, and social reasons for engaging in the research (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). This methodology calls for an open and transparent posture on the part of the researcher and celebrates the researcher’s subjectivity. For example, within the narrative context, I am required to situate myself in the work. In so doing, I explain its significance to me, and make my purpose, position, and experiences explicit within my investigation (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). As a researcher, I was emboldened to share my positionality throughout the inquiry process, as the “I” was celebrated rather than shunned (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Managing bias and its impact on the interpretation of data have been crucial as I positioned myself in relation to my own story and the narratives of the boys. As a Black, female, early childhood PIRT coach who has worked in state-funded preschools in an urban district for over 15 years, I have been an insider to some aspects of this research. I began this process with some knowledge of educational practices toward preschool aged Black boys. In addition, I am also aware of the harmful effects of individual and institutional racism and bias. Simultaneously, I been an outsider, unaware of the lived experience of being a Black boy in an urban educational system. Practical justification for
beginning the research process required I explore the ways preparation, practice, and the understanding of educators in state-funded preschool programs may shift as a result of this research. This also stipulates there are considerations for how this inquiry may advance theoretical knowledge or methodological considerations for doing research with Black boys in preschool programs (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

**Common Places**

To further increase our understanding of their experiences, I move from justification to exploration. In this unique phase, it is critical to attend to the common places of temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). As Murphy (2004) wrote, “Thinking about schools as landscapes is a way of thinking about how children make sense of school and understand it in their lives” (p. 29). In this regard, I explore their relational experiences with their teachers and the ways their stories are shaped by those interactions.

**Temporality**

Within the narrative context, time is significant because all individuals have a past, present, and a future. In this research, I have moved backward and forward through time, acknowledging both the present, past, and future stories of the Black boys who participated in this study and the implications of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Going back required an acknowledgement of their prior experiences within the school context and individual classrooms, as well as their preexisting teacher-child relationships. This exploration also provided a more substantive narrative and allowed my audience to see the young boys in a constantly evolving state. I accomplished this task by inquiring of their past, engaging their present, and simultaneously looking forward into their suggested future within the preschool context and beyond (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
**Sociality**

Narrative inquiry is focused on people in relation and their experiences within these relationships (Clandinin et al., 2010). Within the narrative context, relationships are central (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). I have also been interested in the social aspects of human life (Meier & Stremmel, 2010): The thoughts, feelings, behaviors, dispositions, and relationships of the boys. My relationships with each boy and their social context has also been significant. The foundation of any narrative process rests on a shared trust between the researcher and her participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Within this space, I have moved inward to understand the values, feelings, and dreams of the boys. Additionally, I looked outward to the social conditions such as racism, bias, and institutional oppression and how these conditions have collectively impacted the boys.

The common place of sociality also required my willingness to look within at my own history and narrative be adequately prepared to do so for my participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). A pivotal aspect of this work rested in my willingness to look out into the immediate institutional system of the state-funded preschool program in an urban district and how I have functioned within this system. This acknowledged my own privilege, power, and bias within this realm. There must also be an acknowledgement of the broader society and institutional implications for constructing narratives with my preschool participants. This delicate yet powerful alliance has culminated in a collaborative effort between the boys and I to live, tell, and retell the story of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

**Place**

Within narrative inquiry, place or location is defined as the concrete physical boundaries where the events take place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). There are considerations for the
broader community and familial contexts throughout the narrative. I attended to this aspect by focusing on various elements of state-funded preschool program and the environmental setting which allowed my participants to experience child well-being in their preschool classroom. As I interviewed the boys in a preschool classroom similar to theirs within their school and observed the boys in their class, I was conscious of the impact of place on how they responded to questions and engaged in the research process.

Throughout this inquiry, I have had to shift within the three-dimensional common spaces of time, social interactions, and place. This experience was an immense struggle as often there were numerous places to which I was required to attend. Being “wide-awake” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 83) to particular realities was jarring, sobering, and overwhelming at times. I learned, that although being awake is transformational and powerful, it can also simply be hard.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The collection, understanding, and value, of data is also carefully outlined within the narrative context. Dixon-Reeves (2018) wrote, “Narrative inquiry is unique from other forms of data analysis because it implies that knowledge itself is valuable even if only one person knows it” (p. 61). The methods chosen to explore the educational experiences of Black preschool boys were a significant part of the narrative process. This process allowed me to simultaneously listen to the boys, make sense of their experiences with their teachers, and tell the story of their experiences (Clandinin et al., 2007). To compose these narratives, I drew from various texts including conversations with the boys, classroom observations, field notes from child interviews, journal entries, pictures, parent interviews, and stories. These were all used as units of analysis for examining and understanding how the boys make meaning of their experiences. This analysis process required systematic critical reflection (Meier & Stremmel, 2010) with me as the
researcher moving through a repeated process of being in the field, composing field texts, sharing interim research texts, and discovering final research texts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

**Field Texts**

Being in the field and gathering information through conversations and interviews required that I resolve to capture the evolving and unfolding of lives (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). At the same time, I was also living with all the children and simultaneously evolving as I spent time in their classroom with them weekly over 4 months. I took notes during and after each visit to the school and throughout the engagement process. Field notes were used as a way for me to join in the narrative as a cocreator of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the interview process, informal meetings and observations of my participants, I kept field notes regarding my thoughts, feelings, and noteworthy interactions. The field notes of my observations later became a part of data analysis.

As I began my attempt at analyzing the field texts, I remembered feeling stuck. I wanted to find the formula that could get me to the right conclusion—a roadmap of sorts. I recalled talking with my cochair who referred to it as a “messy process.” While I resisted initially, this process required I lived in relationship with the field text (Murphy, 2004). This “living with” the texts in some ways warranted I withdraw from other parts of my life to attend to this challenge of wrestling with the complexities of the lives of the boys, their experiences, and their relational experiences with their teacher. I needed to guard myself from the noise, listen for the silences, (Lewis, 2010) and uncover the counter-stories (Nelson, 1995). I resisted the urge to make absolute interpretations and judgements and focused simply on understanding (Clandinin et al.,
2010). I also had the very real internal struggle of making sure not to privilege or make one story more significant than the other (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Interim-Field Texts

Composing interim field notes was the beginning of my own discoveries. These notes included information about my perspectives, reactions, and possible interpretations of the experiences shared by the boys. Drafting interim field texts required I began to think narratively about the field texts within the common places of time, sociality, and place. It was important these elements remained open to multiple meanings and layers of understanding (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). For me, this phase revealed the true art and science of narrative methodology and what allowed me to be present to the tensions inherent in all our relational experiences.

Attending to Tensions

While the presence of tensions may struggle throughout our day-to-day lives, within the narrative context, tensions are embraced. Clandinin et al., (2010) described the relational aspect of tensions as what exists “between people, events, or things, and are a way of creating a between space, a space which can exist in educative ways” (p. 82). The five tensions of narrative inquiry are temporality, people, certainty, action, and context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The tension of temporality speaks to the notion individuals are not the sum of their experience at a given moment in time. Rather “any event or thing has a past, a present, as it appears to us, and an implied future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 30). My interactions with the boys were not limited to time spent with them during interviews and during class observations; instead, it encompassed their history and futures. The tension of people is particularly relevant for preschool age children and reflects the notion that people are always in process—particularly within the educational context—as they learn and master new skills, goals,
and objectives. I incorporated this tension and suggest that Black boys at the preschool stage of development are ever-evolving and developing and are constantly “in the process of change” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 30) and on their way to becoming even through their interactions with me.

The tension of action reflects how a behavior is understood. This tension suggests behavior is viewed through a comprehensive and historical lens and not in isolation. For example, a boy’s interaction with his teacher in class is not a reflection of the totality of his relationship with his teacher. More accurately, action considers his history within the educational context and experience with that teacher, other teachers, and learning process overall, and must therefore be understood as such (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Certainty questions the degree to which the meaning of experiences are accurately interpreted. In my inquiry of their experiences of child well-being practices from their teachers, there were uncertainties about the experiences of the boys. I best accounted for this tension by gathering data in multiple ways (i.e., observations, child interviews) from multiple sources (i.e., child and parent interviews). Context reflects the ever-present accounting for the influence of time, place, and other people in an experience (Clandinin et al., 2010). From this perspective, I was always considering my preschool participants in context with an awareness for who occupied their physical and social environments. These tensions could only emerge from experiencing the relationships the boys had with each other, in relation to their teachers, the school, and in relation to me (Clandinin et al., 2010). Attending to tensions within the narrative context required me to acknowledge the plurality in relationships and connections (Park et al., 2016). Given my multiple identities and roles (Black woman, educator, PIRT coach, and social worker), this awareness became important as I positioned, repositioned, and considered my privilege, various perspectives, my ethical and
relational responsibility to the boys, their teachers, their families, and the school district. Exploring the nuanced complexities of narrative tensions created opportunities for me to think differently about our experience of human relationships (Meier & Stremmel, 2010).

**Construction of the Narrative**

Through this analysis, multiple layers of the story were revealed and required me to fully engage in the process of accurately recording each boy’s experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Justifying the reasons for entry and attending to the three common places of time, sociality, and place, are interrelated and inform how narratives are constructed. Unlike other kinds of qualitative analysis that focus on reducing parts down to smaller meaning units, narrative methodology puts pieces together and constructs an interwoven mosaic of an experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I began to construct a narrative of each boy’s experience and attended to the three-dimensional space, I was also evolving from becoming more aware of the uncertainties and ambiguities as they unfolded. This resulted in me being more inclined to consider different interpretations (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), of how Black preschool boys experienced child well-being rather than focusing on certainties and generalizations. As Clandinin and Huber (2010) wrote:

> Through engaging with participants, narrative inquirers see themselves and their participants as each retelling their own stories, and as coming to changed identities and practices through this inquiry process. Change also occurs as phenomena under study are understood in new ways and in this way, new theoretical understandings emerge. In this midst, much possibility exists for social change, that is, for the creation of shifted social, cultural, institutional, and linguistic narratives. (p. 17)
Framing the Research Puzzle. Constructing individual narratives for each participant required a unique and intentional focus. I committed to seeing each child’s narrative to completion before moving on to the subsequent child. This process took place between the months of June 2019 through January 2020. I first constructed Kyle’s narrative. The procedures and steps used to construct Kyle’s narrative were subsequently used as a procedural guide or audit trail (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016) for developing the other narratives in the following order; Christopher, Nashawn, and Hakeem. Putting together each narrative was similar to constructing a puzzle. Initially, I framed or created a border for the puzzle. This step entailed finding the corner or end pieces to construct the perimeter of the puzzle.

Review of Field Texts and Interim Field Texts. I combed through the pages of my journal comprised of all the field notes I had written for each visit, interview, observation, or general notation. I underlined each area in the field texts where there was a mentioning of that specific participant. Using data compiled from my field text, I then reviewed the questions or notes about specific interactions. During this phase, I also reread the previously transcribed text of each child interview multiple times. I made notes in the margins and corrections. For example, during Hakeem’s child interview, he got up and walked across the room to talk with his older brother. I made notes about this action and wrote, “Helping older brother understand” (field notes, April 14, 2019).

Replayed Audio Recordings of the Child Interviews. As I continued to complete the frame, I listened repeatedly to the audio recordings of the interviews and reflected on what I was now hearing as these new questions, discoveries, and understanding were interwoven with the field notes and interim field notes I had written during or after the actual interviews. For example, my interaction and exchange with Kyle transpired at a slower pace compared to the
other interviews. I compared my notes from the initial interview with my new observations of his responses to my questions after listening to his interview multiple times.

**Additional Pieces of the Puzzle.** Reflecting on the second hearing and new understanding of the recorded interviews, I wrote additional interim-field texts. This new text reflected my efforts to broaden my narrative thinking about our interactions as I recalled asking questions such as: What were Kyle’s pauses about? Did he not understand my questions? Did he not want to share his feelings? Why did he respond to some questions with more ease than others? Could I have asked the question differently? I also made notes about language pragmatics and what I was hearing in the interactions such as the tone, pitch, pauses, laughter, and even movement during the interviews. At the end of this process I had a fuller sense of each boy. This frame and additional details was based on how I experienced the child during the individual child interview, my observation of how his peers and teachers related to him, how his family described him, and how he presented as a member of the classroom community.

**Seeing the Picture Emerge.** I then wrote a narrative about the experience of my individual child interview with each boy. Initially, this step was aimed at showing a different angle to each boy which was not captured during the regular school day. Details about each individual child interview provided insight into my unique relational experience with that child during a particular moment in time. As I wrote about the experience of each child interview, distinct themes and discoveries began to emerge. After reading the narrative of each child interview, I asked the questions: What is the significance of this encounter? What did you learn? What did you come to know or understand about this child or your interaction that was best or most highlighted during this interview? Some interviews revealed very clear themes. However, other interviews required more time to simply sit with the text, reflect on the encounter and the
experience with each child and the power of that relational experience in a given moment and place.

After generating an understanding of who I experienced each boy to be, I drafted a description of each boy as an individual. I described him physically and relationally using all the supporting data. There were instances when the data did not support my initial descriptors but pointed toward a different understanding of who each boy was. For example, the descriptor I initially used for Nashawn was a ‘pretender,’ based on my initial field notes of our early interactions. However, as I moved through the compiled data and constructed his narrative and experiences of child well-being, the descriptor of an “imaginer” was more adequately supported by the data. Each narrative was reviewed by my cochair and other early childhood professionals to insure they were adequately and accurately supported by the data I had generated.

After several cycles of reviewing the data in this manner I moved more towards exploring the tensions and considering the common places of time, sociality, and place. I also included considerations for tensions related to my observations of each boy’s interactions with his peers, his teacher, reports from conversations with his family, and how I had experienced and observed this child to be in the context of his classroom. I reviewed the constructed narrative and repeatedly asked a primary question as I read, wrote, and reviewed: What ways did this Black preschool boy experience child well-being by being a part of Mrs. Sowell’s class? The final research text revealed my understanding of who each boy was and his experience of child well-being.

**Final Research Text**

The final research texts required some wrestling with many different realities. This is where I made decisions regarding how to present the data I generated in a public form. This
caused a great deal of reflection and wondering. I had to reflect on my initial justification for engaging in this research and purpose for the work. My personal and social justifications reminded me of my priorities. This was in part, to create a platform to share the voices of the boys while preserving the integrity and authenticity of their experiences. This objective was solidified when I used the actual voices of the boys (maintaining anonymity) during a presentation of preliminary findings at a professional conference. Hearing their actual voices was compelling. I realized there are some aspects of narrative that cannot be storied but are best experienced. The decision to use excerpts from their interviews as part of the final research text was informed by my commitment to attend to the authentic voices of the boys.

As I composed the final research text, I also considered elements of audience, voice, and significance. These elements required considerations for those who will read the story (audience), how the telling of the story informs the interpretation of the narrative (voice), and how the audience will be impacted (significance) by the writing based on the construction of the narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Throughout this process I made strong efforts to safeguard my relational responsibility to my participants taking care to manage my own voice and not to “write over” their voices or assert my position as a researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 141). I wanted to authentically represent the boys not just as they existed in the present moment as preschool boys, but with an awareness of how these representations and truths would follow them into the near or distant futures as older boys and young men.

**Rationale for Use of Narrative Inquiry Methodology**

Narrative inquiry was selected as an ideal methodology for this study because of its implicit aim to capture information about the individuality of the human experience and relationships in a given time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The stories told about ourselves,
others, and the relationships experienced can shape the way lives unfold (Gockel, 2013). The narrative method of inquiry complimented the life course perspective as it also accounted for the interaction of personal, relational, temporal, and contextual conditions as part of bringing participants’ stories to life (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Their stories unveiled a myriad of voices that go beyond the dominant paradigm and highlight the relational experiences of child well-being for Black preschool boys in state-funded programs. The construction of their narratives and experiences also emphasized interaction of personal, social, and institutional conditions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through narrative inquiry, the voices of Black preschool boys spoke truth to power. As Nash (2019) wrote:

> You are a scholar to the extent that you can tell a good, instructive story. You are a scholar if you can capture the narrative of your human experience in language that inspires others. You are a scholar if you can present your story in such a way that … it rings true to human life. You are a scholar if you can help your readers to reexamine their own truth stories in light of the truths that you are struggling to discern in your own complicated life story. (p. 46)

**Entering Into the Research Process**

In the section to follow I share the experience of conducting a narrative inquiry at Glenside Elementary School. I outline the search for and identification of a school and the process of developing relationships with school staff, parents, and the boys. I also further detail the recruitment and data generation process. All names and locations are pseudonyms.

**Finding a Place**

The search for a school to conduct the research was layered and supported by significant collaborators who celebrated the possibility of this research. I had hoped to interview boys in a
particular section of this large urban school district. According to the South Ward Children’s Alliance ([SWCA], 2016), the southern section of the district reportedly housed many of the lowest performing schools. The population in this area was 46,171, people 91% of whom identified as African American 12,737 of whom were minors (SWCA, 2016). Of the 12,000 minor children in this section of the district, 1,816 were between 3 and 4 years old. However, there were only 878 high-quality preschool seats available to service 1,816 preschool children (SWCA, 2016). The area was also characterized by high unemployment, low wages, and high poverty—especially among children (SWCA, 2016).

The decision was made to collaborate with a district school location which served children in preschool and beyond rather than a private collaborative preschool site or district operated preschool hub which only served preschool children. Using a district school location provided a broader contextual understanding of the school in which a child was likely to continue his education after the preschool year was complete. I also reasoned that collaborating in an elementary school may provide the opportunity to follow-up with the participants as they transitioned to kindergarten. These search criteria would eventually lead me to Glenside Elementary, but it would not be a direct route.

**Introductions**

Initially letters of inquiry were sent to two principals of district locations with preschool programs hoping to garner interest and support for my project. The outreach letters were sent via an e-introduction by my colleague Jazmine, who had established relationships with principals throughout the district due to her role as a family engagement lead. Her email was sent on my behalf to two male principals in the southern part of the district, both of whom happened to be Black males. Unfortunately, neither principal responded to nor acknowledged the email. My
colleague Jazmine again suggested a meeting with the vice principal of Glenside School, Mr. Mattox. I met Mr. Mattox through an in-person introduction at a district meeting for preschool administrators and support staff. He was the administrator at the school responsible for supporting the lower grades. A White man of average height and weight with short, dark hair, he presented with a laid-back yet earnest demeanor. He was curious and seemingly excited about the research process. I recall he mentioned his wife had done some research and he had come to appreciate all the various aspects involved in such an undertaking. Although he was engaged, he was cautious. I assumed he simply wanted to make sure this collaboration would be a positive experience for Glenside School. In a matter-of-fact manner, Mr. Mattox asked, “This process is all approved by the district and the university’s IRB (Institutional Review Board), right?” (field notes, February 28, 2019). I assured him the process was approved and required approval at four different levels- the university, the school district, the district’s department of early childhood, and hopefully soon the school’s onsite administration. I encountered resistance and skepticism throughout this process even as an employee. However, I believe my position as a member of the early childhood support team may have helped to facilitate this process and alleviate some suspicion.

Cocreating a Process

On February 28, 2019, I met with Mr. Mattox to discuss the process. During the meeting, he shared times and possibilities for recruitment of families, the best time to talk with children, and identified a classroom I could use to talk with the children: “I think it would be great to have a space that was just like their own classroom” (field notes, February 28, 2019). He identified one preschool classroom that would not be in use for the after-school enrichment program as the place for me to conduct interviews. As a novice researcher, I was grateful and appreciative of all
his ideas. Later that morning, he introduced me to five of the six preschool teachers during the first 10 minutes of their grade level meeting. Mr. Mattox introduced me to the teachers: Mr. Santos and Mrs. Levi from the PreK-3 classrooms; Mrs. Smith who worked with the special needs preschool children in a self-contained Preschool Disabled (PSD) class, and Mrs. Sowell and Mrs. Bradford from the PreK-4 classroom. The other PreK-4 teacher, Mrs. Luca, was out on leave for a few weeks, but was scheduled to return the following month.

In that first meeting, I was allowed to share a brief PowerPoint about my research project and the focus. There was an air of skepticism from the teachers as I spoke, which I accepted as a reasonable part of the process. However, the teachers all seemed to trust Mr. Mattox’s lead as he assured them this project was supported by the Office of Early Childhood. I recalled feeling a sense of immense gratitude for this first step. Mr. Mattox commented the school had previously been asked to participate in another research project with what he called a “big-name university.” However, he told the teachers he had refused and that my research style was much more genuine and collaborative. In that moment, I felt like an insider who may have stumbled upon some understanding about the “code of conduct” when working within public schools. I remembered the simultaneous feeling of gratitude and panic. Mr. Mattox had vouched for me and I was not really sure why. I had been accustomed to having to earn respect and favor—particularly from teachers and administrators. I was grateful for the interactions over the years that had taught me valuable lessons about engaging with stakeholders in the communities I served. There was also an appreciation for my coursework and training from the university’s IRB, which helped me begin to understand the fear and skepticism researchers had earned based on our history in underserved communities. As I listened to the teachers’ thoughts, ideas, and concerns about executing the research process, I took notes about their schedules and time-constraints. I left the
meeting feeling heavy and responsible. I still carry this sentiment with me even today, as I am burdened by the question that for me was bigger than the research question itself . . . Will I get this right?

**Finding Participants**

Despite the statistics and reported challenges in the south section of the city, I knew from my previous work in the south region in prior years there was immense brilliance and resilience in the young children who lived in this area. I had experienced their light of hope that radiated in what could at times be considered a dark place. I hoped to present a counter-narrative focused on their strengths as an acknowledgement of their sometimes seemingly impossible victory, not just to survive, but to excel and thrive despite incredible odds.

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?

Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams; it learned to breathe fresh air.

Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared.

— Tupac Shakur, *The Rose that Grew from the Concrete*

**Recruitment**

The school site was an ideal location for identifying participants. I contacted families by outreach flyers (see Appendix B) and distributed them through the school’s two family advocates, or one of the three PreK-4 classroom teachers. Informational flyers which described the study were sent home with prospective participants. If interested in the study, families were asked to contact me and give written informed consent (see Appendix C). No families responded to the flyers. I then shifted the recruitment strategy and arranged to meet parents during arrival and dismissal for a few weeks until I recruited all my participants. I was typically introduced to families by the family advocate or one of the PreK-4 teachers during arrival or dismissal. As I
recruited families and obtained consent agreements, I would call to schedule a day and time afterschool that was convenient for the family’s schedule to meet with the boys.

**Sample Selection**

The participants in the study were selected based on racial identification as Black or African American, being a male between 4 and 5 years of age, having parental consent, providing student assent, and being enrolled at Glenside Elementary School—a district public school which housed a state-funded preschool program. The boys were all PreK-4 children who attended Glenside school, were identified as Black, and had reached their fourth birthday by October 1, 2018, which was the state’s cutoff date for entry into PreK-4 that year. The initial target sample size for this study was 10 boys. Reviews of current qualitative studies that used narrative inquiry design suggest an initial sample size of 10 participants (Gentles et al., 2015). The final sample included one set of twin boys and resulted in a total of 11 boys from three different PreK-4 classrooms. All six Black preschool boys from Mrs. Sowell’s class, three boys from Mrs. Bradford’s class, and two boys from Mrs. Luca’s class signed parental consent and participated in the study. Families were compensated for their time and participation in the study with a $15 ShopRite gift card. This type of payment aligns with principles of ethics and was aimed at reimbursing the child and his family for their time and effort, not as an incentive to coerce participation (Graham et al., 2016).

**Data-Generation Methods**

Stories of experiences were generated through semistructured interviews with the boys, parent interviews, and in-class engagement and observations. I use the term *data-generation* in lieu of data gathering to reflect considerations for the coconstruction of knowledge with the
participants (Murphy, 2004). This discussion also outlines significant protocol adjustments relevant to the data generation methods.

**Semistructured Child Interviews**

Individual interviews are the ideal way to gather information about subjective experiences that cannot be readily observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The face-to-face interviews were conducted based on a pre-planned outline. Prior to starting each interview, I asked each of the boys to give their assent to participate in the interview (see Appendix D). The interview questions were focused on gleaning the positive and enjoyable experiences they had with both their lead teachers and their teacher assistants. These questions were developed in part through a review of the indicators and constructs from the child well-being positive framework (Lippman et al., 2011) as well as the “Revised Children’s Quality of Life Questionnaire” ([KINDL-R]; Ravens-Sieberer & Bullinger, 1998). In addition, my knowledge about the Creative Curriculum and the interest areas (Dodge et al., 2010) also generated questions which were used to gather the contextual aspects of child well-being for the boys as it related to their classroom environment (see Appendix E). The final child interview included such questions as:

- Does your teacher do anything that makes you laugh?
- Are there things you like about your class?
- Do you do things that are fun with your teacher in class?

To reduce barriers to communication and support children’s developmentally appropriate engagement and discussions with me, the interviews were kept brief and ranged in length from 6 to 12 minutes. Interviews were also conducted in a place of familiarity at the school site in a PreK-4 classroom which replicated the Creative Curriculum designed play areas, similar to their own classroom (Fattore et al., 2009). During the interview, after each question, I would repeat
my understanding of each answer given by the boys. This strategy was used with the intention of clarifying understanding and reducing misinterpretation of speech due to age-appropriate articulation errors common for preschool children. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure descriptive validity (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016). A parent or other designated adult was present at the time of the child interviews. I interviewed 11 preschool boys who ranged in age from 4 to 5 years old. They each shared various aspects of their school experiences and relationships with their teachers.

**Parent Interviews**

As an additional method of understanding each boy’s relational experience with his classroom teacher, I also spoke with a parent of each boy. The parent interviews were conducted in person and over the phone at the conclusion of each child interview. These interviews were conducted to review and clarify elements of the boy’s school experience with his classroom teacher as told by the child to his parent (see Appendix F). The semistructured format included questions such as: *Do you think your son likes his teacher? What do you think he likes best about his teacher?* The parent interview helped to increase validity and clarified my understanding of their experience by including an additional perspective (Creswell, 2016).

**Classroom Engagement and Observations**

Throughout my 4-month in the field, I made approximately 20 visits to Glenside Elementary. Visits took place before, after, and during the school day for varying lengths of time. The initial goal and focus of spending time in the classroom was to build rapport with the participants in preparation for their interviews. I was introduced to all the children in all three classrooms as Ms. Keisha, “A visitor who would be coming to our class sometimes to visit” (field notes, February 28, 2019). During my visits, I would sit and observe or engage with the
children if they approached and invited me to play or read a story for the teacher during read-a-
louds.

Protocol Adjustments

My initial methodological plan was solely to conduct interviews with the boys about their relationship with their teachers. I recruited 11 Black preschool boys across three different classrooms who had three sets of PreK-4 classroom teachers. I interviewed all six Black preschool boys from Mrs. Sowell’s class: Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, Hakeem, Jason, and Malachi. I interviewed three boys from Mrs. Bradford’s class—Rashid, Kevin, and Omar—and two boys from Mrs. Luca’s class: Steven and Paul. I spent time in each classroom getting to know the boys before their individual child-interviews, as a way to build rapport with the boys so they would be a familiar with me at the time of the interview.

Given most of my participants were in Mrs. Sowell’s class, as the weeks progressed, I spent comparatively more time in Mrs. Sowell’s classroom than in the other two classrooms. As the interviews concluded, and I began to analyze the data, it became apparent I had generated rich data based on my in-class observations and interactions. This data provided additional insight about the boys, their relationship with each other, and their teachers. My goal to construct rich narratives and include this data required me to adjust my research protocol. As part of my ethical responsibility as a researcher, I returned to the families and the school site to obtain additional parental consents (see Appendix G). These consents allowed me to include the data gathered through in-class observation in my analysis and construction of the narratives for each boy. I also asked the teacher for permission to include quotes from her conversations with the boys in my observations (see Appendix H). The resulting narratives shared in the subsequent sections reflect my findings of four of the six boys in Mrs. Sowell’s class. The individual
qualities of each of the four Black preschool boys reveal unique consideration for child well-being.

**Ethical Considerations**

This section outlines the steps taken to address ethical challenges throughout the research process. First, I highlight the procedural safe-guards used to ensure anonymity. Second, I explain the various strategies I utilized to enhance trustworthiness. Lastly, I attend to foundational principles for engaging young children in the research process.

**Procedural Safeguards**

To protect the confidentiality of each participant, names and identifying information was removed and replaced with pseudonyms. Interview transcripts and any other digital copies of data have been stored on a password protected drive which was only accessible by the primary researcher on this protocol. Additionally, field notes were stored in a locked file cabinet located in a private office for which only I have a key. In adherence to the ethical care and principles and university guidelines, this study was submitted and approved by the Montclair State University’s ethics review committee as well as the Institutional Review Board for the school district.

**Trustworthiness**

A limitation and challenge of narrative inquiry design is the dilemma of adequately interpreting stories and or representing the voice of another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness is the extent to which the experiences of participants are accurately represented (Urban & van Eeden-Moorefield, 2017). I utilized collaboration and triangulation to increase trustworthiness in my research methods increase validity (Patton, 2003).

**Collaboration.** To ensure my own bias did not dictate portrayal of the boys’ experiences, I collaborated with the teacher to review their narratives periodically and ensure their
perspectives and my observations of who each boy was in relation to their peers. Member checks was used to foster credibility in the research process (Curtain & Fossey, 2007; Harper & Cole, 2012). I intentionally repeated the answers of each child throughout the child interview to assess if I had correctly understood their answers. This was also used as a strategy to rule out any errors or misunderstanding during the transcription process. I also engaged in regular peer reviews with early childhood professionals from various disciplines as well as my committee cochairs to assess the credibility of my findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Triangulation.** This method was used to cross-reference information from multiple data sources and maintain accuracy of information by accounting for alternative explanations (Creswell, 2016). I used multiple forms of data collection throughout the research process as a method of substantiating the evidence I obtained through various sources. Information was gathered through individual child and parent interviews as well as classroom observations. Drafts of my observations were discussed with the teacher to verify accuracy of my understanding.

**Unique Considerations for Research With Young Children**

There are methodological and ethical challenges inherent with including the voices of young children in participatory research (Graham et al., 2016). Although valid, these concerns discount the valuable contributions preschool-age children have brought to the research process over the years (Clark & Moss, 2001; McNamee, 2005; Kennedy-Behr et al., 2015). Five foundational principles must be addressed to embark on the journey of conducting research with younger children. These principles include (a) the researcher must accept the premise young children are competent; (b) young children have rights; (c) young children can and do communicate, (d) young children are owners of valuable knowledge about their lives (Clark & Moss, 2001); and (e) the researcher must also be willing to employ developmentally appropriate
ways to include children in the research process through supportive and child-centered procedures (Fattore et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2016; Lippman et al., 2011). These principles helped to guide my practices and procedures throughout the research process.

This dynamic process of simultaneously experiencing, telling, and being a part of the story allowed me to enter the midst and inquire of their experiences alongside the boys as participants and coresearchers in this inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). I lived with the boys and all the children across three classrooms. However, I most effectively attended to the three-dimensional space of time, sociality, and place and generated rich, comprehensive data in Mrs. Sowell’s classroom. Within this unit of analysis, the data generated facilitated the construction of the most detailed narratives. While all the experiences were significant, for this dissertation, I focused on a smaller selection of boys within one classroom and focused on the unique aspects of child well-being. Narratives of Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem each created an “intersecting plotline” (Murphy, 2004, p. 38) of experiences of child well-being.

**Putting the Study Into Context**

This section provides the reader with a contextualized understanding of Mrs. Sowell’s classroom which reflected the setting, physical layout, and the daily routine in a typical state-funded preschool classroom in this district. I also provide information regarding the teachers’ required professional qualifications. In addition, I share a brief overview of *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool* (Dodge et al., 2010). Finally, I review various components of the classroom’s physical environment (see Figure 2), with a description of the interest areas (see Table 2), and an overview of the daily schedule (see Figure 3). Collectively, these descriptions are relevant to our exploration of the individual, relational and contextual aspects of child well-being for each participant.
Teachers and Classmates

The two teachers with whom I worked most consistently were Mrs. Sowell, the lead teacher and Mrs. Walters, her teacher assistant. Under the requirements of New Jersey Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines (2015), each preschool classroom must be staffed with one qualified teacher and one qualified teacher assistant. The teacher’s minimum educational requirements are a bachelor’s degree and a preschool through grade three certificate or other equivalent (New Jersey Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines, 2015). Under the state’s implementation guidelines, the class size is limited to 15 children. Mrs. Sowell’s class of preschool children consisted of seven boys six of whom were Black boys, one boy who was Latino, eight girls, six of whom were Black girls, one girl who was Latina, and one girl who was biracial. More specific demographic information about the teachers will be detailed in Chapter 5.

Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum is one of four preschool curriculums approved by the state of New Jersey which aligns with Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards (New Jersey Department of Education, 2014) and adheres to The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s [NAEYC] guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (New Jersey Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines, 2015):

The Creative Curriculum for Preschool is a comprehensive, scientifically-based curriculum, linked to an assessment system that addresses teachers’ need to know what to teach and why, and how children learn best. It specifies the literacy, math, science, social studies, arts, and technology content to be taught, based on published standards. It relates directly to the subject area curricula used in elementary schools, so children’s learning in
preschool forms the basis of all of the learning that will follow. Its distinguishing features are a framework for decision making and a focus on interest areas. (p. 25)

**Physical Space**

Upon entering the main entrance to Glenside Elementary, which educates children from preschool to eighth grade, the preschool wing is to the right and down a short L-shaped hallway. This corridor ends at Mrs. Bradford’s classroom and to the immediate left is Mrs. Sowell’s classroom. As per the Creative Curriculum guidance, Mrs. Sowell’s room was organized into 10 interest areas (blocks, dramatic play, toys and games, art, library, discovery, sand and water, music and movement, cooking, and computers (Dodge et al., 2010; see Figure 2).
The descriptions of the play interest areas in Mrs. Sowell’s classroom (see Table 2) were paraphrased from the *Creative Curriculum for Preschool Volume I: The Foundation*:

Block area was an interest area where children could create, design, or build what they saw in their environment. Materials included blocks made of wood or foam for children to build structures or include other toys such as cars, trucks, or trains.

Dramatic play area allowed children to make sense of their experiences. In this area children could take on various pretend roles alone or in collaboration with other peers or adults. Materials included dolls and household items as well as props to support the roles of medical
personnel, firefighter, postal worker, law enforcement, clothing for those in positions of royalty, as well as business, or executive personnel.

Toys and games area is comprised of materials that teach math and support hand-eye coordination and enhance small muscle skills.

Art area is a place where children can express their ideas and feelings using various art materials such as paint and playdoh.

Library area is a quiet place where children were able to enjoy books.

Discovery area allowed children to explore various materials firsthand. Some materials found in discovery included rocks, pinecones or leaves as well as binoculars and magnifying glasses.

Sand and water allowed children to increase their understanding of scientific and mathematical concepts as they played with sand and water.

Children also enjoyed outdoor gross motor activities with areas that are strategically arranged for children to develop motor skills, balance, and coordination. Throughout the choice time children were allowed to stay in one interest area or rotate based on time and space availability.
Table 2

Creative Curriculum Interest Area Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block Area</td>
<td>Children could create, design, or build what they saw in their environment. Materials included blocks made of wood or foam for children to build structures or include other toys such as cars, trucks, or trains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Play Area</td>
<td>In this area children can make sense of their experiences by taking on various pretend roles alone or in collaboration with other peers or adults. Materials included dolls and household items as well as those to support the roles of medical personnel, firefighter, postal worker, law enforcement, clothing for those in positions of royalty, as well as business or executive personnel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toys and Games Area</td>
<td>Is an area comprised of materials that teach math and support hand-eye coordination and enhance small muscle skills. This includes, puzzles, linking cubes, and Legos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Area</td>
<td>Is a place where children can express their ideas and feelings use various art materials such as paint and playdoh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Area</td>
<td>This area quiet place where children were able to enjoy books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Area</td>
<td>Was a place for children to explore various materials firsthand. Some materials found in discovery may include rocks, pine-cones or leaves as well as binoculars and magnifying glasses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand and Water</td>
<td>Is an area where children to increase their understanding of scientific and mathematical concepts as they play with sand and water.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. From Preschool Instructional Expectations (PIE), by Newark Public School Office of Early Childhood, 2017 (http://tinyurl.com/OECPIE)
**Daily Routine**

Each day Mrs. Sowell and her class maintained the same schedule (see Figure 3) which included arrival routine, large group, small group, read aloud, outdoor time, choice time, clean-up, lunch, rest, limited choice or snack, clean-up, large group round-up meeting, and dismissal.

**Figure 3**

*A Replica of Mrs. Sowell’s Daily Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creative Curriculum Sample Full Day Schedule</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrival/ Greetings/ Limited Choice/ Breakfast</td>
<td>20 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Group</td>
<td>15-20 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice Time (Interest Areas)</td>
<td>60 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean-Up Time</td>
<td>10 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Groups (Teacher and TA)</td>
<td>30 mins. (Total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to Outdoors</td>
<td>10 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Choice/ Gross Motor Time</td>
<td>35 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Up/Jackets Away/Handwashing</td>
<td>5 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Aloud</td>
<td>15 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch/Handwashing/Tooth Brushing/Prep for Rest</td>
<td>30 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest</td>
<td>60 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition from Rest</td>
<td>10 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Group Roundup</td>
<td>20 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Choice/ Small Group/ Snack</td>
<td>40 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean-Up Time</td>
<td>10 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Aloud (Teacher’s Choice)</td>
<td>15 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* From *Preschool Instructional Expectations (PIE)*, by Newark Public School Office of Early Childhood, 2017 (http://tinyurl.com/OECPIE).

Large group took place each morning for 15 to 20 minutes. The goal of this part of the day was to provide children with a sense of belonging and to practice communication skills
(Newark Public Schools Office of Early Childhood [NPSOEC], 2017). Large group included an opening routine, discussions and shared writing as well as a time for children to express feelings, ideas and questions and solve problems that affect the whole group (NPSOEC, 2017). Morning choice time would take place for at least 60 minutes. During this time, children would choose the areas and materials where they would like to work/play and invite a friend if possible. This extended play time is supported and enhanced by adult support and allowed the children to become involved in in-depth play (NPSOEC, 2017). The small group experience involved both Mrs. Sowell and Mrs. Walters facilitating lessons with two different groups of children at the same time in the morning. The lessons were designed to introduce new concepts or materials and individualize instruction. During this time of the day, Mrs. Sowell and Mrs. Walters would make written observations of children to document their learning (NPSOEC, 2017). In preschool the children also experienced a daily nap or rest. Children were not mandated to sleep as resting or engaging in a quiet relaxing activity such as looking at books or creating a puzzle, were also considered appropriate.

The constructed narratives of each boy included considerations of the narrative landscape of time, sociality, and context. This required an awareness of how each commonplace coincided with the unique experience of child well-being for each boy as he is considered within the broader life course perspective: Time as a factor for the development of child well-being considers the significance of building a foundation and experiencing each boy as evolving; sociality explores considerations for seeing significant relationships as catalysts for change; context highlights the state-funded preschool classroom environment with programmatic and curriculum structure.
Chapter 4: Findings

Meeting the Boys

Throughout this analysis I aimed to capture the unique relational experiences of Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem. Their narratives are not complete or balanced representations of *all* Black preschool boys or their experiences with their teachers. Rather, they reflect my understanding of four unique preschool boys and their experiences in a given time and place with a specific teacher. These accounts are not void of my existence; instead, they are in relationship with me as I too, experienced each boy in his layers and complexities.

The narratives to follow outline the relational experiences with Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem. I share various angles of my encounters with the boys as I gathered data through in-class observations as well as child and parent interviews. I outline specific qualities I experienced as unique to my encounters with that child over my 4-months in the field. I intentionally used illustrations of Black boys who embody characteristics similar to each child. Age appropriate photographs were selected from the internet to capture a physical description similar to each boy as well as to contextualize and humanize each child for the reader. The narratives are revealed in order based on the dates their child interviews were facilitated.

Each narrative entails four angles and descriptions of the child. First I provide observations of his behaviors, ways of being in his classroom, and his individual characteristics. This is followed by a description of various relational accounts which capture my understanding of their relationships with significant others such as peers, teachers, and their family. Next, I also share my experience of the child during their child interview. Then, each child is also described in the context of his classroom community, his interactions and experiences of the physical environment, and elements of the curriculum. After each description, I explore their experiences
of well-being. I first reveal my understanding of each boy’s individual experience of child well-being. The subsequent analysis of each boy’s relational experience of child well-being reveals my interpretations of how they each relate to significant others within their environment and my understanding of how each boy experienced his teacher through conversations, play, and perceptions of her actions. I then share findings of their contextual experiences of child well-being within this state-funded preschool program supported by the developmentally appropriate, play-based, Creative Curriculum (Dodge et al., 2010). Finally, I discuss the life course perspective by highlighting relevant principles.

This analysis called for both an awareness of the common places of time, sociality, and place and considerations for the tensions of time, action, certainty, people, and context. In this awakened posture, there is a possibility to see inside the opening (of a new perspective) to question, to pause, to consider, inquire and allow ourselves and others to be “shaped” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 85). As the narratives are constructed, findings are focused on the guiding research question which enhances our understanding of ways Black boys in state funded-preschool programs experience child well-being practices from their teachers.

Stories matter, many stories matter, stories have been used to dispossess and to malign but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009

**Meet Christopher: High Achiever**

I introduce Christopher as a high achiever (see Figure 4) because of his high-achieving and revered status among his peers and adults. His narrative explored Christopher’s individual,
relational, and contextual experiences of child well-being. This narrative highlights his individual need for a classroom community where his strengths are celebrated and honored, his relational need for reciprocal peer support, his contextual need for a balanced environment.

**Figure 4**

*Illustration of a Preschool Boy with Characteristics Similar to Christopher*


My first official day in Mrs. Sowell’s class was on a bright, sunny morning in the middle of March 2019. Mrs. Sowell introduced me to all the children at the same time and then gave me a short introduction to each child as she and I walked throughout the room. It was arrival time and most children were engaged in various parts of their arrival routine as they prepared to gather into their large group meeting and start the day. Christopher, I noticed was the smallest
boy in the class, he had a closely faded haircut, light skin, and brown eyes. He was neatly
dressed and had what stood out as a serious and focused presence. His initial acknowledgement
of me was a concise “Hello” as he looked up briefly from his structure, before returning to his
building. His words were crisp, clear, and well-articulated which was different from the slower
developing speech patterns and age-appropriate articulation errors I had come to experience from
preschool children. Christopher seemed focused on completing the structure he was building in
the toys and games area. I recalled Mrs. Sowell’s anticipatory excitement about the possibility of
me getting a chance to interview Christopher. She said with a big confident smile, “I can’t wait
for you to interview Christopher and hear what he has to say. You’re gonna get a kick out of
him!” (field notes, March 14, 2019). During my various observations and encounters with
Christopher (field notes, March 14, 2019; April 4, 2019; May 5, 2019; June 13, 2019; June 18,
2019), such as when I observed him building a structure, eating lunch, listening and sharing in
large group, answering questions during his interview, transitioning from choice time, or during
the Pre-K Moving-up Ceremony, he was consistent in presenting a dedicated yet no-nonsense
demeanor. In school, I had not observed him to be silly or off-task. Rather he presented as
focused, efficient, and task oriented. Unlike other 4-year-old boys I had encountered, he exuded
a strength and maturity that was different. I would come to experience Christopher as articulate,
confident, and admired by both his peers and adults.

Being in Relation With Others

Mrs. Sowell seemed eager for me to hear what Christopher had to say. However, I was
most intrigued by what Christopher’s peers had to say about him. During that initial visit as
lunchtime approached, I sat with Christopher and some of his peers at one of two lunch tables in
the classroom. Christopher ate his own home-packed lunch and sat listening and commenting as
his friends shared. While he engaged in light socializing, he did not play with his food or delay in any way (field notes, March 14, 2019). At lunch, he was attentive to the task at hand, which in that moment was eating, cleaning-up, and then getting ready for rest-time or a nap. I sat and listened for a moment and then asked each child his or her name. Nashawn proudly told me his name was Chris. Another boy corrected him firmly saying, “No you’re not!”, but Nashawn quickly retorted with his final and decisive answer on the matter, “Yes I am! That’s my name today!” Resolute, he took a sip of his milk and continued eating (field notes, March 14, 2019). In that moment, I wondered with curiosity why Nashawn wanted to pretend he was Christopher? Why he wanted me, a new visitor in his classroom, to know him as Christopher even though that was not his name? I would soon come to understand the mystery—at least in part—of perhaps why he and the other boys all seemed to admire Christopher. As the dispute about who was the “real” Christopher began to fade, Jason got up from his seat, walked over to Christopher’s chair, stood behind it, pointed to Christopher, and announced to me, “This is Christopher. He smart, not us” (field notes, March 14, 2019).

Most boys in this class seemed to note and respect what Christopher had to say, while others seemed to just enjoy being around him. During a later visit, I observed a different response from another boy Kyle, who Mrs. Sowell asked to share something he knew about sand. After pondering for a moment, Kyle stated, “I agree with what Christopher said” (field notes April 4, 2019). I wondered if this was because Kyle was so confident in the answer Christopher had given, he simply went along with it? On another day during choice time, Jason excitedly noted after he selected to go to the toys and games area where Christopher was already playing, “Christopher! I’m in toys and games with you!” (field notes, April 4, 2019). I was not sure if Jason liked playing in the same area with Christopher because he enjoyed his company or if he
liked the idea of being around Christopher—a boy he believed to be the smartest in his class—or some combination of both. I was also intrigued that during my time visiting Mrs. Sowell’s class, I did not observe Jason highlight his own preacademic skills and talents or that of other peers—only Christopher’s. The notion Jason viewed Christopher as the smartest boy who was unmatched by his peers was repeated later in the Spring. This occurred one afternoon during a conversation I was having with Mrs. Sowell, as she tried to indirectly praise and encourage another boy, Hakeem, for his preacademic skills.

Mrs. Sowell: Ms. Keisha, Hakeem is really smart! Sometimes he doesn’t want to show me how very smart he is, but he is so smart.

Jason: (Overhearing the conversation) Yeah, but Christopher is really smart- he knows 12 plus 12.

Mrs. Sowell: (Seemingly surprised by the interjection). He doesn’t know 12 plus 12- I don’t think anybody (in this class) knows 12 plus 12. Christopher, (calls him from across the room) what’s 12 plus 12?

Christopher: (From across the room) Hmmm, I don’t know (shrugging his shoulders)

Jason: But Christopher knows 4 plus 4. (Yells across the room) Christopher, what’s 4 plus 4?

Christopher: (Still playing across the room in toys and games area. Looks up briefly and in a matter- of- fact manner replies) Four plus four is eight! (continues playing)

Jason: (Smiles at Mrs. Sowell): See I told you. (field notes, June 13, 2019)

I believe both Mrs. Sowell and I were a little stunned and confused by the exchange that had transpired, so much so, Mrs. Sowell and I both let the moment settle without any further inquiry.
I was puzzled about Christopher’s superstar-like status among his peers. As I considered the narrative tensions of action and time, I questioned the meaning of Jason’s behavior. I wondered if other proximal or distal events had fueled that perception of Christopher? Had this perception of Christopher generated solely from Mrs. Sowell’s adoration and praise of him, as she had done in her introduction of him to me? Or had there been other prior experiences with Christopher—perhaps during his PreK-3 school year—that had helped to catapult him to this respected status among his peers? Had Jason and others with their childlike discernment, sensed the same focus and confidence about Christopher I experienced on that first day? Or was it the cumulative and interactional effect of these factors that resulted in the kinds of relational experiences I observed Christopher having with his peers. I was curious why Jason only highlighted Christopher’s intellect. Could there only be one smart boy in his class? Did he not believe it was possible for both Hakeem and Christopher to be smart? And why was Jason so content to fight for Christopher to be victorious in the battle of intellect? Why was his intelligence not a part of the conversation? What were those messages subtle, spoken, and unspoken about being “smart” that had Jason so convinced at 5 years old it could only be Christopher? I struggled with the narrative tension of certainty during and after this experience as I considered various possible meanings of that moment in time for Christopher, Jason, Hakeem, and Mrs. Sowell.

I would later wonder if it were possible for all Black preschool boys to be seen by others as advanced learners as some seemed to view Christopher. What did Christopher symbolize in his preschool classroom? Did he serve as a symbol of what could be possible for all or only attainable for some? In a classroom where children could aspire to emulate many different behaviors and be in awe of various qualities, the boys in this preschool classroom appeared to
revere a peer whom they believed to be “smart.” I considered how my experience of this reality bumped up against the deficit-based narratives of Black boys and men who are often incorrectly stereotyped as lacking value for education and achievement (Rowley et al., 2014). I also wondered what it would take for Jason to also see his own skills and preacademic talents in a positive light? I considered how his developing academic identity would evolve? Would Jason’s peer connection or role modeling from Christopher (a Black preschool boy with whom he shared similar interests from his classroom community) be enough to help foster his own positive academic identity?

I later wondered about Hakeem who overheard his friend gloss over his potential. Whose opinion about his academic identity would matter most: Jason’s, Mrs. Sowell’s, his family’s, or his own? I had many questions about Christopher’s status among his peers and what his high achieving preacademic skills meant to those around him. Mostly, however, I was hopeful this little boy who was a bright, shining, advanced leaner in preschool, would continue to shine his “brilliant light” as he transitioned to kindergarten and beyond. I was cautiously optimistic that along his educational journey, as he transitioned to other educational contexts such as elementary, middle, high school, and college, would he have peers, educators, and family members to support and encourage his status as a high achiever just as they did in preschool? I also questioned if the cumulative effects of these significant relationships were what would matter most in helping Black preschool boys develop and maintain a positive academic identity and foster their experience of child well-being in preschool.

**Being in Relation With Mrs. Sowell**

While Mrs. Sowell’s proud introduction of Christopher gave me high hopes and curiosity about this young learner. I was also curious about Christopher’s experience of Mrs. Sowell.
During his child interview when asked about his relationship with Mrs. Sowell, he and I had the following exchange.

Keisha: What are some things that you like about your teacher?

Christopher: She helps me sometimes.

Keisha: She helps you sometimes, okay. What does she help you do?

Christopher: She helps me make a structure.

Keisha: And does she ever do anything that makes you laugh?

Christopher: No

Keisha: Are there any fun things that you do with Mrs. Sowell?

Christopher: Centers.

Keisha: You do, you go to centers?

Christopher: Like different centers.

Keisha: What’s a different one that you would go to with her?

Christopher: Toys and games. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

As I reviewed his responses, the tension of certainty caused me to question my understanding of Christopher’s experience. Although, he appeared to experience Mrs. Sowell as a supporter who helped him “Sometimes.” I wondered if Christopher’s presentation as a child who was self-directed and focused resulted in Mrs. Sowell allowing him to be more independent in the classroom. I was curious, if Christopher, even as an advanced learner, enjoyed being helped and supported by his teacher?

I later came to understand Mrs. Sowell seemed to view Christopher as someone she could count on in class to make the right decisions, rise to the occasion, and to tell the truth about events. During one choice time selection process (field notes, April 4, 2019), several children
wanted a chance to spend time in the dramatic play area. One child was told there was no more room and he would have to choose another area to play and wait for a turn. A second child protested she also wanted to play in that area and that one girl—Cierra—had gone to that center every day that week and had gotten a turn again today. Cierra protested and shook her head vehemently. The line for the debate was drawn among the children. In true preschool fashion, one side stated, “Yes, she did, (go to the dramatic play yesterday)” and others stated, “No she didn’t.” Mrs. Sowell seemed unsure about that particular detail and in that moment, she called on Christopher and confidently asked, “Christopher, did Cierra go to dramatic play yesterday?” In his typical articulate and confident manner, he replied, “No, Mrs. Sowell, she did not.” Christopher’s answer was to be the deciding factor, and that was that. None of the children disputed his final testimony, Cierra stayed in the dramatic play area that day, and off they went with the rest of the daily routine.

I reflected on the power of Mrs. Sowell’s trust and confidence in Christopher; how that confidence in him allowed his peers and perhaps Christopher to develop a positive regard for his abilities. Christopher may not have required intensive support or instruction with preacademic skills such as literacy or social emotional skills such as focusing and attending. Yet at age 4, he seemed to be developing leadership qualities. The tension of action called into question the intensions of Mrs. Sowell’s choices. Were her actions aimed at fostering and encouraging his confidence, independence, and developing leadership abilities? I wondered if Mrs. Sowell was building on the strengths Christopher seemed to already possess and in her own way countering the deficit-based narratives and expectations (Nelson, 2016) of who Black boys in preschool could be? I was also curious how her perception and treatment of him may have influenced Christopher’s experience of child well-being.
Showing Care and Engagement

Christopher was the first boy I interviewed on April 4, 2019. He came to the interview accompanied by his mother and his older sister. There was light chatter from his family across the large preschool classroom where the interview took place. Throughout the interview day, we were interrupted by sporadic afterschool announcements on the school’s intercom system calling for various children to report to the main office for pick-up. Christopher never looked back at his family, waivered in his attention, or appear distracted. Rather, he sat attentively listening and responding as I proceeded with each question. His interview was approximately 6 minutes long—one of the shortest—which I attributed in part to his focus and efficiency.

Perhaps due to the high regard I observed from his teacher and peers, I incorrectly expected profound responses to my questions from this 4-year-old boy. In those initial moments, I erroneously neglected his developmental needs simply because he was reportedly an advanced learner. Christopher presented in the interview as he had consistently done throughout my time at the school as focused, confident, and articulate. If this interview process was a new experience for him, he did not present in that moment as doubtful or unsure. He was patient, steady, and attentive to the task at hand. He would answer my questions in short, direct phrases, without a lot of hesitation such as the exchange below illustrates:

Keisha: Does your teacher ever do anything that makes you feel special?

Christopher: Plays with me

Keisha: Do you know what it means to care about someone?

Christopher: No.

Keisha: So, when you care about someone it kinda means that you help them do
things to make them feel better. And you show them where things are if they don’t know
where they are, or you might help them put on their coat if they need help, so that would
be how someone shows that they care about you.

Christopher: I always do that.

Keisha: You always do that? Who do you do that for?

Christopher: Isabella.

Keisha: And do you think that your teacher cares about you?

Christopher: Yes.

Keisha: Yeah? What makes you think that?

Christopher: Because she gives me stuff.

Keisha: What do you think is the very best thing about preschool?

Christopher: Because it’s fun.

Keisha: Because it’s fun. And what’s the most fun?

Christopher: We get to play in our centers for a little bit. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

I considered the ways children who are advanced learners such as Christopher may
inadvertently be cheated of their childhood interests and engagement in developmentally
appropriate activities because they are advanced in preacademic skills. For Christopher, who was
demonstrating advanced preacademic skills, it was evident play, having fun, and receiving
support from his teachers in various interest areas were some of the ways he experienced child
well-being from his teachers. At the end of the interview when I spoke with his mother and asked
if she thought Christopher liked his teacher, the exchange went as followed:

Keisha: So, do you think Christopher likes his teachers?

Mother: He loves his teachers.
Keisha: Why do you think he loves his teachers?

Mother: He comes home, and he talks about her all the time—probably almost every other day. I think what makes him love the teachers is that they actually show that they care. They engage with him a lot. Cuz even the times that I have come to the school, during school, I would see that—you know—they engage with him a lot, so I think that makes a difference to him. He’s really observant. (parent interview, April 4, 2019)

Christopher’s mother also commented he would talk at home about all the things he learned in school. She added that most recently, Christopher told her he and Mrs. Walters talked about his new sneakers and then she taught him how to tie the laces on his new sneakers (parent interview, April 4, 2019). Based on this conversation, I understood that although Christopher was a high achiever who was focused and confident in school, he had relevant age-related needs for acquiring self-help skills, such as learning to tie his laces. Christopher was encouraged and supported in both his personal and academic development by adults in his classroom. His teachers allowed him to experience a balance of nurturing instruction and independence.

**Individual Experiences of Child Well-Being: Building on Strengths**

Christopher’s narrative presents an often-untold story of Black preschool boys who are advanced learners excelling both socially and academically. As I analyzed the data and constructed the narrative of his experiences of child well-being as a Black preschool boy, there are several individual qualities that distinguish his narrative. Acknowledging Christopher’s strong preacademic skills and fostering the development of a positive academic identity encouraged his confidence and a love of learning. He presented as self-assured in his abilities. When he was asked questions or was tested in his knowledge, by peers or adults, Christopher was forthright about what he did know, and seemed unphased by what he did not know.
According to Vygotsky (1978), during their preschool years, children begin to develop and formulate ideas about themselves, their identity, their place in the world, and in relation to others. His process of developing, becoming, and attaining new knowledge and skills daily, highlighted the tension of time and the benefit of Christopher developing this positive identity at this stage in his development. He presented as a preschooler who was perceived by both his peers and teachers as an honest, reliable, advanced learner, who was able to meet any challenge.

Although development of identity construction is more complex for Black preschool boys as it reflects considerations for both race and gender (Howard et al., 2013), I wondered if it were possible Christopher had begun to develop a positive academic identity. Academic identity underscores the degree to which a person delineates himself by his academic performance (Osborne & Jones, 2011). The perceptions of his teachers had implications for his developing sense of self (Barbarin, 2013; Graves & Howes, 2011). These teacher perceptions are critical when evaluating Christopher’s preacademic skills (Bates & Glick, 2013; Downer et al., 2016) and how he is perceived by his peers (Bryan, 2017). I considered the ways Christopher benefitted from being in a preschool classroom with a teacher who celebrated his ways of knowing and being, perceived him in a positive light, and built on his strengths. According to Whiting (2009), “Diverse males who have a scholarly identity believe in themselves and their abilities and skills as learners; they are resilient, have self-confidence, self-control, and sense of self-responsibility. While recognizing their shortcomings or weaknesses they, nonetheless, believe themselves to be capable students. (p.3). Mrs. Sowell appeared to provide a balance of support and challenge for Christopher. As an advanced leaner, this combination enhanced Christopher’s experience of child well-being by promoting preacademic skills, confidence in school, and may have included considerations for how he saw himself as learner (Whiting, 2009).
Relational Experiences of Child Well-Being

In contrast to the ways some Black preschool boys may experience strained relationships with their teachers based on negative teacher perceptions about their identity (Graves & Howes, 2011; Wood et al., 2017), Christopher experienced a supportive, affirming environment from his peers based on his teacher’s positive perceptions of him as a leader who was also a high-achieving Black preschool boy. It appeared his presence in Mrs. Sowell’s class may have served as a mutual benefit to both he and his classmates.

Relational Teaching Practices

A relational teaching perspective (Reichert & Hawley, 2014), calls for teachers to question negative perceptions of Black boys and men which exist in society. Mrs. Sowell’s interactions with Christopher suggests she did not accept the dominant deficit narratives about Black boys and men that exist in society. Instead, it appeared she fostered positive beliefs about Christopher and his potential abilities. Given achievement (Downer et al., 2016), and recommendations for gifted and talented programs (Ford, 2006) are influenced by teacher assessments. Mrs. Sowell’s praise of Christopher’s potential and her confidence in his leadership ability to clarify a misunderstanding amongst peers may have also positioned Christopher in a positive light for others. This recognition of his skills and positive regard for who he was as an individual fostered his individual experience of child well-being. Consistent with the positive indicators of the child well-being framework (Lippman et al., 2011), Christopher’s report of feeling helped and supported by Mrs. Sowell, captured his positive relational experience of child well-being.
Reciprocal Peer Support

Christopher served as a positive peer support for his preschool friends. Jason, Kyle, and Nashawn each viewed him in high regard. Their praise and admiration in turn supported his confidence and social emotional development. Through this reciprocal connection, Christopher benefitted from the support of his peers. Similarly, their experiences may have been enhanced by having a peer who served as a symbolic representation of an academic excellence in their classroom. Although it was clear Jason distinguished his preacademic abilities from Christopher’s, his affirmation for Christopher’s strengths seemed to reflect a sense of pride. Perhaps it was also significant Christopher was a Black boy from the same community, who looked like he did. Experiencing visible representations of Black males who are symbols of academic excellence in their schools and communities, has been associated with fostering positive academic identity for young boys (Wright & Counsell, 2018). Christopher’s presence in this preschool classroom as a peer role model who exemplified preacademic excellence provided reciprocal benefits of child well-being by fostering confidence, hope, and pride in both his evolving academic identity and that of his peers.

Contextual Experiences of Child Well-Being: A Balanced Environment

Christopher’s experience of child well-being in the preschool classroom was supported in two important ways. Mrs. Sowell allowed for Christopher to experience a fine balance of agency and independence in his classroom as well as connecting with him while he engaged in the activities he enjoyed. Christopher reported he most enjoyed playing in the block area and having a big class (child interview, April 4, 2019). Perhaps most significantly, he stated the very best thing about preschool was, “It’s fun. We get to play in our centers for a little bit” (child interview, April 4, 2019). Mrs. Sowell executed her role in preparing the centers and the
environment to ensure Christopher could experience child well-being by engaging in hands-on, interactive, developmentally appropriate activities (Boykin et al., 2006) such as building in blocks and toys and games areas. Christopher also relayed feeling special when his teacher shared his interests of building structures with him in the various centers. For Christopher, his teacher’s engagement with him in these interests areas strengthened their relational connection and allowed Christopher to feel special. In so doing, Mrs. Sowell also created a classroom environment that expanded his interests and fostered the development of early preacademic skills such as math and literacy for Christopher and his peers (Davis & Farran, 2018).

**Summary of the Life Course Perspective of Child Well-being for Christopher**

Christopher’s narrative presents a counter-story of Black preschool boys who are high achievers excelling both socially and academically. As I analyzed the data and constructed the narrative of his experiences of child well-being as a Black preschool boy, there are several individual qualities as well as relational and contextual considerations that distinguish his narrative. Acknowledging Christopher’s strong preacademic skills and fostering the development of a positive academic identity appeared to encourage his confidence and a love of learning.

Understanding the individual, relational, and contextual experiences of child well-being for Christopher also required examining key principles of the life course perspectives. The principle of linked lives identifies the ways individuals are shaped through the connections they have with significant others in their lives (Elder, 1998). The teacher-child relationship also provides a relevant example of how a child’s life can be linked with those outside the family and improve through the promotion of positive development and well-being (Brenner, 2011). The principle of linked lived is reflected in Christopher’s positive relationship with Mrs. Sowell
during his preschool years. This finding suggests he experienced child well-being through the promotion of a positive belief in his abilities and sense of self.

My reflection of this relational encounter also caused me to consider the novelty of my experience with advanced learners like Christopher. While this was a new experience for me in preschool, it was not because high-achieving Black preschool boys like Christopher did not exist. More accurately, my experience of Christopher as such a novelty said more about me and my role than of Christopher. As a PIRT coach, my focus has been helping teachers support preschool children who experience challenges or were slowly developing skills. Advanced learners like Christopher, who have the combination of strong social-emotional and pre-academic skills, are rarely on my radar. His experiences with his peers and their awe and pride in Christopher and his abilities highlighted the need for the educators and researchers to be more deliberate and intentional in efforts to consistently identify and support advanced leaners like Christopher. A shift in identifying strengths and assessing for gifted or advanced learners in preschool, may prove instrumental in improving the achievement trajectory for Black boys in preschool and beyond (Iruka, Winn, et al., 2014). This notion reinforced my belief the educational community should also focus on enhancing child well-being and promoting optimal development rather than unilaterally addressing challenges and deficits (Lerner & Chase, 2019).

**Meet Nashawn: Imaginer**

Next, I introduce Nashawn who I experienced as an imaginer (see Figure 5) because of his playful and creative demeanor. Throughout this narrative I explored Nashawn’s individual need to be nurtured in developmentally appropriate ways. His relational and contextual experiences of child well-being underscore his love of play and an environment which supported his creativity.
Children must add another survival skill imaginative play. They must practice pretending to be someone else in another place, making up character, plot, and dialogue for the stories they invent. They are in truth inventing abstract thinking - the act of stepping outside oneself and viewing a broader perspective of relationships - verbal, visual, social, physical. But they are also - it seems to me - inventing reading, writing, and arithmetic. All in an earlier primitive form, in preparation for. They are inventing and reinventing themselves as thinking people before the world tells them what to think. They do this, as they literally play around with ideas. In effect, the child says, ‘I am someone with ideas, I am someone who turns ideas into actions, and actions into new ideas, and furthermore this is what I’m intended to do, I am intended to have my own ideas. That’s why I play the way I do-to show myself what my ideas are and how necessary I am to the community’ (Paley, 2008, Wonder Play Conference, 00:39).
During my very first interaction with Nashawn, he was pretending to be someone else. As he sat at the lunch table with his friends and I asked his name, he told me his name was Chris. Nashawn had light skin, golden brown hair, and light-brown eyes. Although he was the youngest in the group with a late September birthday, he measured up physically to his peers in his height and weight. His eyes which were filled with a playful wonder and curiosity and seemed to always be scanning the room, bouncing from one area to the next, trying to take-in everything about the people and objects around him. He seemed readily able to move in and out of playing in the present, pretending to be someone else, calling on some prior knowledge or experience, or a mixture of all three. Nashawn seemed to also enjoy having a good time. In his own unique style, he would find fun ways to make games out of ordinary or mundane activities such as cleaning up or eating. During one of my visits, Nashawn in his typical jovial manner, tried to make the cleaning-up routine a race, as he hurriedly stashed away the wooden blocks in the block area (field notes, April 4, 2019). I would come to experience Nashawn as a child who enjoyed playful jovial interactions. He presented as a curious, unassuming boy, with a vivid imagination, and a keen sense of perception.

Nashawn spoke with age-appropriate articulation errors, such as “dat” for “that” and “mile” for “smile,” as many of those letter sounds or blends typically develop at age six or later (Smit et al., 1990). Although these errors made his speech at times difficult to understand, they did not appear to deter Nashawn from readily expressing his thoughts and opinions. Nor did his developing expressive language skills detract from his abilities to perceive or understand what was happening around him. He appeared to be making sense of things in his own way and communicating to those who took the time to understand his language.
Unlike some of the other child interviews, I was able to gather a lot of rich data about what mattered most in his experience of well-being during my child interview with Nashawn. When asked what things he liked to do with his teachers he replied, “Talk to dem” (child interview, April 4, 2019). Nashawn was clear about why he liked Mrs. Sowell, he stated, “She let me play games.” (child interview, April 4, 2019). He explained Mrs. Sowell made him feel happy when she “Make a happy face.” He added it was also fun for him to, “Make a silly face,” with his teacher, “And she laughs” (child interview, April 4, 2019). He shared Mrs. Sowell also made him laugh when she tickled him. Although Nashawn presented with a child-like and playful demeanor, he also appeared to be very aware of what was happening around him and would adjust accordingly. This was evident during our interview when his mother who was present initially, left the room for a brief moment. While she was gone, I recalled he seemed to be less censored about sharing his thoughts. Throughout our interview, he also took the time to correct me if there were any stated inaccuracies. For example, when I asked him if he knew what it meant to care about someone, our exchange went as follows:

Keisha: Do you know what it means to care about someone?

Nashawn: Uh-huh, well, you just play wit somebody.

Keisha: And…

Nashawn: (Interjects) My sister and my mommy

Keisha: Oh, your sister and your mommy, do they care about you?

Nashawn: Well, my sister don’t, cuz, she always be mean to me. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

Nashawn, in many ways, was curious to me as he seemed to simultaneously represent various polarities. Namely, he was the youngest boy who enjoyed being silly and playing games,
yet he was also quite perceptive and aware of his surroundings in a given moment. In addition, he maneuvered the challenge of his developing expressive language skills as a boy who had a lot to share and enjoyed talking with his teachers.

**Being in Relation With Others**

While Nashawn liked to play and talk with his teachers, it became increasingly apparent his peer relationships were also an important priority. During the initial minutes of his interview when I asked about his teachers and the things he enjoyed doing in school, Nashawn took a moment to steer the conversation towards talking about his friend:

Keisha: What do you do? (In blocks)

Nashawn: I make racetrack.

Keisha: You make a racetrack? Whoa! And tell me about your…

Nashawn: (Interjects) Best friends? (Smiling)

Keisha: Yes… (Laughing) Who’s your best friend?

Nashawn: Christopher. He’s my best friend. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

Nashawn was eager to share about the friendships he experienced in preschool. When asked to share the things he liked about his class, he quickly responded, “I love my best friend!”

It appeared he looked up to and revered Christopher, who seemed to also serve as a big brother or peer role model for him. During one of my visits, Nashawn turned the cleaning-up routine into a competition, as he hurriedly stashed away the wooden blocks his “best friend” Christopher who was playing with him in the area, spoke firmly to him, warning, “It’s not a race Nashawn!” (field notes, April 4, 2019). As I observed Nashawn pause, then slow-down the pace at which he returned the wooden blocks to the shelf, I thought about the power of positive peer relationships. I also reflected on our first meeting when Nashawn introduced himself to me as “Chris.” I
wondered in that moment about the qualities this playful, light-hearted preschool boy, found appealing about his best friend Christopher?

Nashawn’s mother was a member of the school staff and one of the first parents who agreed to participate in the study. She stated she was curious about the research and wanted to know more about what she could do to support her young son. Nashawn had an older sister who was 11 years old and who attended a different school. He seemed to have a supportive mother who was keenly aware of his progress in school and wanted to see her son succeed. However, I also wondered what it was like for Nashawn to have his mother work at the school he attended. I was curious about how those dual roles may have impacted Nashawn, even as a preschool boy. Was he aware his mother was present in the building and easily accessible? Did this reality perhaps cause him to feel more accountable? What, if any, were the privileges that also came with those pressures?

Nashawn appeared to balance different roles a preschool boy: He was tasked with leveraging his light-hearted nature as a child who had a more serious and focused best friend; he may have also had to weigh his love for playing, imagining, and talking about different realities, as the youngest in his class in a place called preschool where his mother was also present. I wondered how those pluralities as an individual were experienced in his relationship with Mrs. Sowell.

**Being in Relation With Mrs. Sowell**

Nashawn reportedly enjoyed talking with his teachers and also reported feeling cared for by his teachers. When asked if he thought his teachers cared about him, he and I had the following exchange:

Keisha: What about Mrs. Sowell, does she care about you?
Nashawn: Sometimes.

Keisha: How do you know?

Nashawn: Because I’m a big boy.

Keisha: Because you’re a big boy and how do you know that she cares about you?

Nashawn: Um, she play wit me in blocks.

Keisha: Because she plays with you in the block area?

Nashawn: (Interjects) And in toys and games.

Keisha: And who helps you if you need help in class?

Nashawn: Um, Mrs. Sowell. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

I interpreted this exchange “Because I’m a big boy,” to suggest Nashawn felt confident in his ability to assess his teacher’s care for him and in addition he also equated time and play with care and support from others. His mother speculated there were different reasons why Nashawn liked his teacher. She stated, “I think because she has patience. Her tone is always the same. Obviously, she gets mad sometimes, but you wouldn’t know it. Not by her tone anyway, she’s not a screamer” (parent interview, April 4, 2019). Nashawn reported he felt supported and cared for in his class. In addition, he shared he enjoyed playing and being silly with his teacher. I had come to realize Nashawn’s keen sense of perception and creative imagination, were masked from me by his playful imaginative nature. I would not become fully aware of these aspects of Nashawn until his child interview.

**Superhero Status Protects**

Nashawn was the second boy I interviewed. Upon entering the room, I watched his eyes continue to move all around the room, I could sense a little excitement about being in this different but similar classroom. I would later learn Nashawn was keenly processing and taking in
all the pictures of the movie characters on the classroom wall, making his own observations and explorations of this environment. As I prepared to start my questions, I made a light-hearted attempt to draw Nashawn’s attention towards me:

Keisha: I’m gonna get ready to ask you my questions, you got your listening ears on? Should I turn them up?

Nashawn: Yeah. (Smiling)

Keisha: Click, click (made pretend motions as if turning up his right ear). Is that one (referring to the left ear) up too?

Nashawn: (Smiling) You just pretending…

Keisha: (Laughing) Yes, I am just pretending. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

Throughout this 10-minute interview, I would periodically need to bring Nashawn back to, what I thought at the time, was the topic at hand. Yet as I reflected on our encounter what I later learned, was the importance of letting children lead, as well as the value in being able to communicate and understand their language.

In addition, to wanting to talk about his friends, Nashawn tried to incorporate aspects of his favorite movies, television shows, and imaginative play into our conversation. The classroom where he and I met, had a picture posted of the teacher in a Halloween costume dressed like a character from *The Incredibles* movie. After a few questions Nashawn pointed it out to me:

Nashawn: I watched dat movie before.

Keisha: You watched that movie before, okay.

Nashawn: (Got up and pointed to the picture) Dat one.

Keisha: That’s a movie you like? Who’s in that movie?

Nashawn: Frozone.
Keisha: That’s who? Frozen?

Nashawn: Nooo! (Enunciating slowly) Frozone!

Keisha: Oh, Frozone, okay. So, can you tell me a little bit more about what you like about Mrs. Sowell?

Nashawn: (Sounded disappointed) Yes. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

Unfortunately, my ignorance about the character Frozone from the movie *The Incredibles* left me at a loss for how to connect with Nashawn’s interests. However, in typical preschool fashion, he provided another opportunity for me to better understand his school experiences. As our interview approached the end, I asked Nashawn if he felt safe in his classroom, our exchange went as follows:

Keisha: Do you feel safe in your class?

Nashawn: Yeah.

Keisha: Yeah, what makes you feel safe?

Nashawn: If you go into a monster room, a real one... You will run and den Catboy will save the day.

Keisha: Oh, so if you’re going to a monster room and there’s a big one then it will roar and somebody saves the day?

Nashawn: Yeah. It’s Catboy

Keisha: Oh, the cowboy saves the day?

Nashawn: [Enunciating] Cat-boy!

Keisha: Who is Catboy?

Nashawn: [Long Pause, surprised look] [Dramatic- high- pitched voice] You don’t know Catboy??!
Keisha: I don’t know Catboy, I’m sorry, is he in your classroom?

Nashawn: No!! [Dramatic-high-pitched voice. Shaking his head]

Keisha: Oh, so what makes you feel safe in your classroom?

Nashawn: Catboy!

Keisha: Catboy makes you feel safe in your classroom?

Nashawn: Yeah, because he from da PJ Mask. He’s so fast and he has stripes

Keisha: He’s from PJ Mask and he’s so fast and he has stripes?

Nashawn: Yeah, and he can jump. (child interview, April 4, 2019)

Nashawn’s departure from the present moment into a pretend world of Catboy and superheroes caught me off guard. During the interview, I struggled to keep up with where he was going and what he was trying to express. This confusion was layered by my lack of knowledge about the characters or the shows he was referencing. I later interpreted this exchange to be Nashawn’s communication of the power and ability of superheroes like Catboy to save the day. I later questioned what Nashawn may have been trying to communicate during the interview. Perhaps there were times in school when he did not feel safe and pretended to have a superhero status like Catboy from *PJ Mask*, who could come out and save the day.

The tension of temporality caused me to reflect on my own practice. This tension reflected the notion individuals are not the sum of their experience at a single moment in time. Instead, “any event or thing has a past, a present, as it appears to us, and an implied future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 30). My interaction with Nashawn was not limited to time spent with him during the interview, more accurately, it encompassed his prior experiences. Even as a professional who worked in the field of early childhood, in that moment, I privileged the present over the past experiences Nashawn may have had. As the conversation about feeling safe in his
class continued, Nashawn would go on to share more about the friendships Catboy had, he stated, “Well, when Catboy get out in da movie and he saves da day but he’s friends is An Yu and Gekko” (child interview, April 4, 2019). I understood this to mean his friends and the friendships he experienced may have also served as a source of comfort and support for him in school.

**Individual Experiences of Child Well-Being: Responding to Developmental Needs**

It was evident engaging in fun, playful activities was important for Nashawn. I also understood the value of being able to share his thoughts and feelings with his teachers was enjoyable for him. In addition, I understood the importance of making time to play and interact with him. For Nashawn, this spoke care and appeared to enhance his experience of child well-being. I understood from my conversation with Nashawn he experienced aspects of well-being in his relationship with Mrs. Sowell. She attended to his playful and jovial nature by engaging in making silly faces with him and playing with him in ways he enjoyed. According to Nashawn, “playing wit me” was what spoke care to him.

I also reflected on the importance of attending to a child’s personal interests and relevant aspects of who Nashawn was as an individual. Nashawn required his teachers to acknowledge and celebrate his love of imaginary play as well as accept his individuality and childlike demeanor rather than require he behave as a more advanced or older child. For Nashawn, it was important for his teacher to take time to sit and talk with him. I reflected on his gift of having a teacher with whom he could share and express verbally, particularly for a child who presented with articulation errors. During my time as a PIRT coach, I experienced young children who would limit their conversation with adults, for fear of being corrected or misunderstood. I thought it was noteworthy Nashawn characterized his conversations with his teachers as
something the he *liked* to do. I interpreted this was perhaps because he felt heard and understood during those conversations. Nashawn experienced child well-being by having a teacher who took time to listen and play and accept of his particular stage of development.

**Relational Experiences of Child Well-Being**

These various relational accounts highlighted several important considerations for Nashawn’s experience of child well-being. Namely, they required those who were charged with supporting him be willing to understand his interests in order to celebrate his strengths. Enhancing Nashawn’s experience of child well-being also meant his caregivers respected and valued the totality of who he was—a fun-loving and playful boy who was also perceptive and creative. It was only through taking the time to know and investigate who Nashawn was and how he moved through and experienced his world, that I came to respect and understand the power and the brilliance of his imaginative play.

**Alternative Possibilities and Present Realities**

Although my exchange with Nashawn was comical, this interaction highlighted considerations of child well-being that caused me to pause and reflect on my own practice and privilege in my interactions with young children. I considered the ways I have missed out on opportunities to connect and get to know young boys because I was not aware of their interests and the toys, games, or television shows that are relevant and important to them. My ignorance about who Catboy, *PJ Masks*, and *The Incredibles* were, caused me to miss a key moment of relational connection as I struggled to understand his way of communicating and learn more about his experience. After my confusing exchange with Nashawn, I took a moment to gather some information about PJ Masks. I learned “the PJ Masks is a show about heroism. … As night falls and they put on their pajamas and activate their animal amulets, they magically transform
into superheroes: Catboy, Owlette, and Gekko and become the PJ Masks!” (Ashby, 2019). The slogan from “PJ Masks we are on our way, into the night to save the day!” (Ashby, 2019) created a whole new understanding of what Nashawn may have been trying to communicate to me about feeling safe.

My preschool friend Nashawn was in fact making sense of his world, “stepping outside” himself, and reflecting on superheroes who are strong and powerful, perhaps in moments when safety may have been in question. I wondered if this moment of drawing on a pretend world allowed Nashawn to imagine new possibilities where he was powerful, strong, and brave enough to save the day as he existed in a world of present realities? This tension of action caused me to wonder about Nashawn’s interpretation of my question. Were there times he did not feel safe in school? Did PJ Masks come to mind during nap-time? Was that a time of the day where he may have felt vulnerable? I was curious if there were other moments when having superhero-like qualities were required? The tension of time conjured up feelings of regret about those final moments of the interview … I wondered how different that interaction could have been if I had “gotten it?” The tension of people caused me to reflect on what may have been Nashawn’s initial expectations of me. Had he surmised based on the classroom pictures of the Incredibles characters and our initial exchange about “pretending to turn his listening ears up” that I may have been a “fellow imaginer?” I thought about the ways of knowing and perceiving for young boys that are different but often not considered as valuable by adults. I wondered how he may have felt about my lack of awareness at the end of the interview. In many ways, this ability to possibly move in between this world of pretense and reality showed a strength and resilience in Nashawn which may not have always been appreciated or understood.
Nurturing Relationships

I considered the ways Mrs. Sowell’s willingness to accept Nashawn’s ways of knowing while relating to him through play, helped to enhance his experience of child well-being. He commented on his enjoyment of his playful interactions with Mrs. Sowell when, “She make a silly face” or “tickle me” (child interview, April 4, 2019). In addition, I considered the significance of his mother’s comment Mrs. Sowell “was not a screamer” (parent interview, April 4, 2019). Being a member of the school staff, I speculated perhaps she had come to experience other teachers who expressed themselves in different ways. However, she understood Nashawn may have been sensitive to a teacher who “screamed.” During Nashawn’s interview he would express a negative experience with a different teacher as he recalled, “She always be mean to me” (child interview, April 4, 2019). In contrast, Mrs. Sowell was a teacher who spoke and communicated with him in a patient, curious, and supportive manner which fostered Nashawn’s experience of child well-being (McNamee, 2005).

An additional relational aspect of child well-being for Nashawn was through his experience of positive peer relationships. During my conversation with him, he freely shared his love for his friends. Positive peer relationships are evidenced by a child’s ability to develop and maintain social bonds and play successfully with others (Thompson & Twibell, 2009). By encouraging the boys to work together to clean up areas, Mrs. Sowell created a classroom which fostered friendship skills such as helping others and working together. During this interaction Nashawn was helped by Christopher’s supportive redirection. It was evident from my conversation with Nashawn that friendships were valued, celebrated, and significant to him.
Contextual Experiences of Child Well-Being: Fostering a Creative Environment

Nashawn and I also had a short exchange regarding what he liked best about school. When asked this question, Nashawn replied, “To go in centers” (child interview, April 4, 2019). For Nashawn, a boy who liked to play and create and use the items in block area to make racetrack, it was important his classroom environment support his love and interest in playing. According to Dodge et al., (2010), the environment communicates and conveys messages to children. Nashawn’s expressed enjoyment of going to play in centers suggested Mrs. Sowell allowed him to experience the contextual aspects of child well-being by creating a safe, interactive classroom, for him to explore and try new ideas (Dodge et al., 2010). Through play and creativity Nashawn was able to take ownership and make meaning of his world. Fostering a creative environment and developing a positive parental relationship, helped Nashawn to experience contextual aspects of child well-being.

Summary of Life Course Perspective of Child Well-Being for Nashawn

Relationships and environments individually and collectively impact the experiences and educational development of young children (Elder, 1998). The principle of linked lives identifies the ways individuals are shaped through their connections with significant others such as teachers (Elder, 1998). Considerations for the principal of linked lives and timing was evident through Nashawn’s relationship with Mrs. Sowell. His preschool experience was enhanced by being a creative young learner in Mrs. Sowell’s classroom, where he was allowed to engage in developmentally appropriate enjoyment of play.

This perspective emphasized considerations for ways educators may adjust their interactions with Black preschool boys who may experience their world through imaginative play. Research suggests Black boys often are seen as older and less innocent than their same age
White peers (Goff et al., 2014), I considered other missed opportunities where teachers may have interpreted developmentally appropriate play as misbehavior. I also considered the need for Nashawn and other Black preschool boys, to be given the space and time to imagine and play, as a means of facilitating their experience of child well-being.

Considerations for connecting with young learners when aspects of their worlds—real or imagined—are unfamiliar, point towards the importance of culturally relevant practices for all educators. McNamee (2005) wrote, “Pretend play is the first building block to common ground in the classroom for young children and their teachers” (p. 277). This notion illustrates the need to extend ideas regarding what may be “educationally relevant?” This notion also presented opportunities to expand adult willingness to better connect with Black boys in preschool. I pondered on the importance of making efforts to know the likes, interests, and out of school experiences of young children and how this knowledge and the willingness to acquire it, may increase opportunities for relational connection, understanding, and engagement with Black preschool boys.

The common place of sociality relevant to the adult use of language, forced me to reflect on my privilege during out interaction. As an educated, adult, Black woman, I was requiring Nashawn speak my language of reality rather than doing the required work to learn his. The feeling of being lost in language and uncertain- about what Nashawn was trying to communicate, made me realize our heavy reliance on monolingual means of communication. I wondered how this posture may impact the experience of child well-being for Black preschool boys. Some educators often rely on spoken words for understanding, communication, meaning, and as an assessment tool. I wondered if other modes of communication were seen as relevant in preschool settings. I questioned if the imaginative play of Black preschool boys was valued as a way to
communicate (Vygotsky, 2016). Additional knowledge, understanding, and connections become possible when educators make the time to share in the imaginative play of preschool boys. My encounter with Nashawn made it clear I did not fluently speak his language of play. In retrospect, I felt disappointed yet grateful for the opportunity I had been given to become more aware of what I did not know and the gift of being taught by a preschool boy.

**Meet Kyle: Thinker**

I now share my experience of Kyle the thinker (see Figure 6), who I observed to be quiet and pensive. His narrative revealed a story of a young boy whose time-sensitive individual needs were particularly relevant to his experience of well-being. In the narrative to follow, I also explore the ways Kyle benefitted from the various relationships within his classroom community and how Mrs. Sowell’s fostering of citizenship and community were relevant to his contextual experience of child well-being.
During my first encounter with Kyle his laidback, unassuming nature puzzled me. He sat quietly and contentedly off to the side watching as all the other children moved about at a quick, fervent pace. Kyle stood out as he was not in a hurry to do anything. His slow, content demeanor was different in the hustle and bustle of this preschool classroom. He was average height and weight for his age. He had even dark brown skin and wore his hair in neatly brushed waves. Kyle had bright, steady, brown eyes. They seemed full of information, a window into the thoughts that were mostly held hostage in his mind. His smile carried a warmth and sincerity that revealed his truth of the moment. On the rare occasions when his otherwise serious countenance gave way to a smile, he seemed to come alive.

In class, Kyle seemed satisfied to melt into the background and get lost in his thoughts. As most of his peers were eager to show what they knew and wanted to be recognized for sharing or answering questions, contrastingly, Kyle had a steady easy posture that suggested to
me he was willing to relinquish the spotlight. I did not observe him initiate many conversations with other peers or adults or raise his hand to ask a question. Instead, Kyle’s distinct way of being and interacting with others was present in the ways he did and did not respond to those around him. During large group meeting when the teacher greeted each child and inquired about their feelings, others eagerly shared. Jason was happy: “Because my birthday coming soon.” Nashawn felt, “Cool, because I’m in school wit my friends.” Malcolm felt, “Marvelous, because it was a good day” (field notes, April 4, 2019). Kyle sat silently and did not reply when asked. After waiting a few moments for him to respond, Mrs. Sowell stated, “Maybe we’ll give him some time to think about it and he can tell us later” (field notes, April 4, 2019).

One day during large group meeting as all 15 children gathered in the circle (field notes, April 4, 2019), Mrs. Sowell shared with the children the new vocabulary word “saturate.” She defined the word, had the boys and girls clap out the number of syllables, and then she used the word “saturate” in a sentence. During the previous weeks, the children had been doing a study on sand from the Creative Curriculum. Mrs. Sowell reminded the children about the study and asked each boy and girl to take a turn telling her something they each knew about sand. As each child eagerly raised their hand to share a variety of answers, “It’s made of rocks, it is found at the beach, you can also find it in the desert.” When it was Kyle’s turn, he sat for a moment, tilted his head slightly to the side, looked at Mrs. Sowell quietly and said, “I agree with what Christopher said” (field notes, April 4, 2019). I wondered why Kyle decided on this response. It was a different way of responding than I had been accustomed to from a prescrawler. Rather than saying the same answer as his peer, he concluded he agreed with a boy who was known for being “smart.” I reflected on the tension of certainty as I pondered on possible reasons for this statement: Did Kyle not have an answer? Was this a manner of responding Mrs. Sowell had
previously used with the children? Did he simply choose to take the quickest way out of the spotlight? Or did he simply just agree with Christopher? Because Kyle did not always express his thoughts verbally, I wanted to know more about him. I wondered about his thoughts, how he felt being in school, how he made sense of his world, the interactions he had, his relationships with his teachers, parents, and friends. I wanted a peak behind the veil of his thoughts and discover how he anchored himself in this steady and easy nature he seemed to possess. Kyle did not offer much in the way of overt ways of knowing, instead he required I pay more attention to those silences.

On days when I was present for morning arrival routine in that class, Kyle arrived late to school (field notes, March 14, 2019, April 4, 2019; May 13, 2019). Mrs. Sowell and her assistant, Mrs. Walters, never admonished him or made him feel uncomfortable because he was brought to school late. Instead, they would welcome Kyle into the classroom with open arms, ask if he wanted breakfast, and direct him to take off his coat and wash his hands. As he slowly and deliberately had his breakfast cereal and fruit at the table, he momentarily looked up from his thoughts. It was then he would finally notice me sitting in the corner visiting that day. As our eyes met across the room, Kyle smiled a familiar reckoning but slightly embarrassed grin, as if to say, *you caught me dreaming*. His gazed shifted and he returned to eating his cereal and seemed to resume his thoughts (field notes, April 4, 2019). Although Kyle arrived later than others and was quiet, he was given the time and space to ease into his mornings. He was able to start the preschool day welcomed, nourished, and ready to take on the tasks ahead.

**Being in Relation With Others**

Later that morning, shortly after the large group meeting ended, the children gathered for small group. They had initially made various geometric shapes on a pegboard and were now
drawing shapes at the toys and games area. There was cheerful light chatter among friends, some
helping others. This was the typical steady engagement and community-like atmosphere I had
become accustomed to experiencing in Mrs. Sowell’s classroom. For me as an outsider who only
visited weekly, it always felt like home. I wondered how much more this classroom was home
for the children who were regularly there.

As I slowly scanned the table to look at each of their eager faces, it was then I noticed
Kyle’s tears as he sat with the pencil in his hand. It was a silent, steady, cascading of tears rolling
down his brown cheeks. The tears seemed to represent a slowly rising bucket, now full of some
sad emotion that had overflowed. As it overflowed there at the table, Kyle’s shaking left hand
tried unsuccessfully to make a trapezoid shape. I observed Jason spring into action. Seemingly
concerned his friend’s tears were due to his frustration about not being able to accurately draw
the trapezoid, Jason went over to assist Kyle in completing the task. I believe Jason had hoped to
stop the tears, comfort his friend, and also show his drawing skills. But the tears continued to
flow and Kyle, now not as silent as before, pushed the tear-filled wet paper away. I sat conflicted
watching him cry. It was difficult to watch. I instinctively wanted to go and comfort Kyle, to
give him a hug and tell him it was going to be OK. This time, however, I resisted the social
worker role of “helping and fixing” and allowed the moment to unfold. It was Jason who again
made a second attempt to resolve his friend’s sorrow. Seemingly confused about what to do next,
Jason walked over to Mrs. Sowell and reported, “Ms. Sowell, Kyle crying. I did it (made the
trapezoid) for him but he said he don’t want it. He said he want his mommy” (field notes, April
4, 2019). Mrs. Sowell thanked Jason. “Jason,” she said softly, “you are being very kind to him-
thank you.” As she sat down next to Kyle and gently put her hand around his shoulder, she
asked, “Kyle why are you crying?” (field notes, April 4, 2019). With his head down, shoulders
shaking, in a slow, quiet, and deliberate voice he muttered between the sobs, “I miss my mom.” Mrs. Sowell softly reassured Kyle, “You know you see her every day, you know you’re gonna see her later” (field notes, April 4, 2019). Kyle’s sobs slowed, as he seemed to catch his breath and allowed Mrs. Sowell to comfort him. The other children in class listened attentively, some still making their shapes, but none said a word or interrupted the moment. As if the verbal confirmation and a gentle touch was just what he needed, Kyle started to settle down and the tears slowed. In that moment Mrs. Sowell skillfully began to transition the focus back to the task at hand. Perhaps in an effort to refocus Kyle and everyone else at the table, Mrs. Sowell looked at his paper and said, “Now, look, that is a great start! You made a good square. Not everyone can make a square like that! You should color that one, that is really good!” (field notes, April 4, 2019).

Later that same morning as everyone continued with their choice time routine and I sat with other children in the dramatic play area, Kyle would come over to show me his completed picture (see Figure 7). I excitedly asked him, “What did you make?” Rather than call it anything or guess incorrectly about his picture, as I had learned to do from watching teachers and teacher coaches over the years. Kyle proudly and quietly told me, “This is a monster trapezoid. And this is blood” (field notes, April 4, 2019). He had creatively made what looked like a house but was a monster with arms, legs, eyes, and a mouth. This creative work of art had started with a square which he colored as Mrs. Sowell had suggested. And after some encouragement and support from Mrs. Sowell and his friends, the trapezoid evolved on top. And while there were many speculations, I could have made about the drawing of a “monster” and the description of “blood.” I intentionally put aside my clinical lens and instead focused on this expression of Kyle’s creativity.
That afternoon as I played with another boy in dramatic play, Kyle came over to sit with me at the pretend kitchen table. When I asked how he was doing, he smiled softly and stated in his slow, quiet voice, “I’m good. My dad brought me some new toys yesterday” (field notes, April 4, 2019). It struck me how this simple expression seemed to exude what I experienced as joy, pride, and relief all at the same time. I believed this expression in that moment was what was important to him, what he wanted to share. I experienced Kyle’s manner as gentle, quiet, and pensive. He never demanded attention or asked to be the center of the room. Instead, it was in this simple stolen and unexpected moment he presented to me the gift of connection. In this brief moment, I felt an immense privilege for the opportunity to be in that space. I would come to understand, although I observed Kyle to be quiet and unassuming, he was a valued presence in his learning community who was supported and nurtured by both his peers and adults.

**Being in Relation With Mrs. Sowell**

I would later learn Kyle had recently transitioned into the role of a big brother and a middle child. His mother had a new baby girl who was now 6 months old. His 12-year-old brother was no longer attending Glenside Elementary School, but according to Kyle, now attended the charter school across the street. Based on these new familial events, Mrs. Sowell
seemed to think Kyle was still, “Adjusting” (field notes, April 4, 2019). During that moment in class when Kyle cried, I wondered what else Mrs. Sowell knew about why Kyle became emotional. What had led to him longing to be in the presence of his mother while sitting in a room full of friends? I marveled at how she seemed to almost instinctively provide comfort and reassurance and then in a subtle, yet timely manner, shifted the focus. As if skillfully maneuvering a slow-moving automobile to make a necessary u-turn, Mrs. Sowell refocused Kyle and his friends back to the task at hand rather than linger in the moment. Although it did not feel hurried or abrupt, I selfishly wanted to linger in the moment of comfort for a little boy who missed his mom and missed being with his mom. I wanted to pause and celebrate this moment of reassurance and acceptance he may have felt with his teacher and friends. It appeared, his classroom was a place where he would not be admonished or ridiculed for being emotional. Instead, he could just cry and let his bucket overflow and be a 4-year-old boy who missed his mom.

I reflected on what I understood to be Mrs. Sowell’s process-oriented disposition towards Kyle. She interacted with Kyle as though he was in a constantly evolving state of becoming, adjusting, and making a good start. As a preschool teacher, her role in the beginning of this developmental stage of learning, she celebrated his efforts and was not solely focused on the product. She encouraged Kyle when he started with “a good square.” Later he would go on to create a “Monster Trapezoid.” Mrs. Sowell waited and allowed for his process to unfold. Kyle would later finish the trapezoid on his own, at his pace, creating a unique piece of art. Mrs. Sowell was able to celebrate and accept his process of learning and honor his development at a given time. For Kyle, it appeared his experience with a teacher who gave him time to think, process, and then share, helped to enhance his experience of child well-being.
During his interview when I asked Kyle about the things Ms. Sowell did that made him laugh, after pausing to reflect for a moment, he replied, “Um Hmm- wit some stories- Where da Wild Things Are.”

Keisha: And what do you like about Mrs. Sowell?
Kyle: She took me to the playground (pointed to the window) out there.

Keisha: And what do you do when you go out there?
Kyle: Go on the slide.

Keisha: What does Mrs. Sowell do to make you happy?
 Kyle: She plays games. Bingo. (child interview, April 11, 2019)

When I asked Kyle if he knew what it meant to care about someone, he stated it meant, “When you play with new stuff” (child interview, April 11, 2019). When asked about whether he felt Mrs. Sowell cared about him, he and I had the following exchange:

Keisha: I was wondering, do you think that your teacher cares about you? Do you think Mrs. Sowell cares about you?
Kyle: (Affirmative nod)
Keisha: Yeah? How do you know?
Kyle: (Silence)
Kyle: (After a 15 second pause) This one is hard. (child interview, April 11, 2019)

After some time and other examples of care, Kyle reported he felt his teachers cared about him because they helped him with his letters and numbers. Kyle appeared to experience child well-being by being a member of a classroom with friends and teachers who supported and accepted his learning pace and celebrated his individuality.
Making Time for Connections

Kyle was the fourth child who I interviewed. He came accompanied to the interview by his mom and his infant baby sister. I can recall it was a sunny Thursday afternoon on April 11th. It felt as if there was a buzz or nervous tension in the air. However, when I sat to talk with Kyle, things seemed to simply slow down. His presence seemed to require that of me—and I welcomed the shift. Before our 9-minute interview began, I had already visited his class several times. However, unlike several of the children who would excitedly greet me and ask me to play with them, when I entered the room, Kyle typically kept a friendly distance. He did not present as eager to get to know me. Kyle and I seemed to have settled into what I would call a distant connection. Perhaps for him, it meant nothing more than the smile of acknowledgement that suggested to me, although he did not know me very well, my presence was welcomed. For me, this meant he and I rarely talked one to one or played together, yet I was getting to know who he was and how he was within his classroom and among his peers.

I recall asking Kyle several questions which were followed by long pauses or silences before answering. While listening to the recorded audio and reviewing the transcripts, I reflected on the silences. There were also moments when I questioned if this process was the best means of engagement for Kyle. I thought about what those silences could have meant for Kyle as I reflected on how silences can be so uncomfortable for us in conversations and yet so very loud.

Keisha: Does your teacher do anything that makes you feel special?

Kyle: Yes.

Keisha: Yeah? What? What makes you feel special?

Kyle: Uh . . . Hmm . . . (10 second pause)

Keisha: Hmm. That’s a tough one? You still thinking about it? Okay. I’ll come
back to that one, okay?

Kyle: Okay.

Keisha: (Later in the interview). Hmmm, okay. So, I’m going to come back to that question that you said was a little hard or was a tough one. I think you said, right? What does Mrs. Sowell do that makes you feel special?

Kyle: Hmm. (Pause) Make four leaf clovers.

Keisha: She makes four leaf clovers for you? Wow. That is very special. Did you get to take them home?

Kyle: Yes.

Keisha: You did. And what about.

Kyle: (Interjects) We made it on paper.

Keisha: You made it on paper? What color did you make them?

Kyle: Green.

Keisha: You made them green four-leaf clovers. That is very special Kyle.

What’d you do with it?

Kyle: (Looking back at his family)

Keisha: You gave it to your mom?

Kyle: Yep (Smiling). (child interview, April 11, 2019)

I wondered if Kyle was uncertain about the meaning of my question. I wondered if his pause in initially sharing about the four-leaf clovers. I thought about how he seemed more confident and eager to share his experience and his response. Perhaps he was affirmed by my validation this was indeed special or perhaps he was simply joyful in the memory of that moment? I wondered about the process of making that clover, the time, the care, the connection
he may have experienced with Mrs. Sowell. I wondered if Mrs. Sowell knew Kyle labeled that moment as special, and that her gifts (time, patience, care, attention) to Kyle would then become gifts for others in both figurative and literal ways.

This experience highlighted the importance of taking time to sit with and experience young children as individuals and the importance of making a one to one connection. My initial goal was to move through the interview as efficiently as possible in hopes I would not lose his interest. However, Kyle required I take the time he needed to think, process, and express. In the hustle and bustle of the busy preschool classroom, I would have had limited opportunities to listen, sit, and talk with Kyle in this manner. It was curious to me that, after this interview, Kyle would come to greet during subsequent visits to his class. I would later wonder if this new greeting and possible connection was due to the time I had recently spent with him during the interview, my willingness to wait and listen to him, his knowing I also spoke to and connected with his mother, or some combination of all three.

**Individual Experiences of Child Well-Being: The Gift of Time**

Kyle appeared to experience child well-being in a myriad of ways by being a member of Mrs. Sowell’s preschool classroom. His individual temperament as a quiet, pensive, Black preschool boy with many strengths and skills that were not always readily noticed, required nurturing relational support from his teacher. I did not observe Mrs. Sowell ever rush Kyle to produce an answer, rather she allowed for him to have time to formulate an answer and revisit when necessary. This is subtlety can be missed in early childhood classrooms and in life.

While some children can process a lot of information relatively quickly and with ease, others require more time to take in information, process it and then act (Kelly, 2018). The term *wait-time* refers to the amount of time a teacher gives a child to think of an answer to a question.
and respond (Rowe, 1986). While wait-time can be uncomfortable for teachers it can be a powerful learning tool for improving the quality and type of answers children provide (Kelly, 2018). Like Kyle, children and young children may need time to formulate thoughts and ideas, in addition, they also need to feel safe to share.

Considerations for the gift of time also caused me to reflect on methods of assessing young children. I questioned if there could there be considerations for educators to assess for the same concept in different ways. Kyle did not produce the trapezoid on demand as an isolated shape. However, when given the time and space to create, he produced it as a creative work of art in the context of a monster. I wondered how educators could be more open to making time to assess for different ways of knowing and assessing skills and competencies. For Kyle, his teacher’s holistic and progressive approach to early childhood development enhanced his experience of child-well-being.

**Relational Experiences of Child Well-Being**

The encouragement and care Kyle received from his friends and his teachers did not go unnoticed. Kyle shared his teachers helped him with letters and numbers and his friend Jason helped him with his shapes.

**A Community of Learners**

I recalled seeing Kyle sitting with Mrs. Sowell working on number concepts (field notes, April 2019), he appeared to be at home. I had seen other children in different classrooms show frustration or appear overwhelmed by working with their teachers in this manner. Kyle did not appear to experience Mrs. Sowell’s or his friend’s help in negative way. Rather, he appeared to feel positively about receiving help from his teachers and peers. An environment where children are praised for supporting their own growth and that of their peers is referred to as creating a
community of learners (Ladson-Billings, 2009). For Kyle, the experience of a supportive, cooperative, learning environment built on mutual peer support and encouragement rather than competition and individualism (Boykin et al., 2006) provided an experience of relational well-being for Kyle. Both examples of individual instruction and collaborative team-work with his peers were understood as positive relational experiences for Kyle.

**Social and Emotional Skills and Needs**

Helping preschool children develop in areas of social and emotional competencies are vital for their well-being (Hemmeter et al., 2014). Being able to adequately express emotions, solve social problems, and relate to their peers are important considerations for developing positive relationships in school (Hemmeter et al., 2014). Within this context relational experiences can also teach young boys how to effectively engage with others in affirming ways (Howard et al., 2013). Those experiences must often be modeled and or facilitated by a caring supportive adult. During his interview when asked about the things he liked about his class Kyle stated, “My friends” (child interview, April 11, 2019). Kyle appeared to experience positive peer relationships in his preschool classroom that allowed him to feel safe and supported. In addition, Mrs. Sowell facilitated care and support from other peers in the classroom like Jason. Her warm affirmation of Jason as he helped Kyle was a lesson in teaching social-emotional competency. Supporting young boys as they explore ways to make and maintain friendships is an important educational practice. Mrs. Sowell modeled and reinforced for the children how to respond to the emotions of others (Hemmeter et al., 2014).

During our child interview, I would ask Kyle why he felt safe in his classroom, he replied after pausing, “Hmm. Cuz my friends.” Kyle would also state the best thing about his class was his friends. When asked if he had a best friend, he would give that honor to Jason, because, “He
help me do my shapes” (child interview, April 11, 2019). Mrs. Sowell’s role in creating, fostering, and supporting those friendships. Her encouragement and praise of friendships and friendship skills such as helping and caring for others perhaps encouraged Jason’s efforts to be kind to his friend. I reflected on how this facilitation ultimately led to Kyle feeling “safe,” in his classroom.

Kyle’s experience of child well-being from Mrs. Sowell was also evident in how she directly responded to his emotional needs as a teacher. For example, she was able to provide comfort to Kyle when he missed his mom. She acknowledged his feelings, reassured him, and allowed Kyle to experience his emotion of sadness in a nonjudgmental way. Making room for the expression of emotions can create challenges for some educators in school settings. In addition, creating a space where a Black, preschool boy like Kyle could safely express his emotion of sadness was a gift in support of his emotional well-being. In a society where emotions, particularly from boys, are often shunned and admonished (Chu, 2014; Howard et al., 2013), her response presents an opportunity to reflect. My reflections of biases and adult reactions to the emotions which are not happy or angry caused me to question if educational spaces make room for young boys to experience other emotions? I pondered about the spoken and unspoken messages given to Black boys in preschool regarding the expression of emotions such as fear, loneliness, sadness, or rejection? Kyle received the benefits of both direct and indirect support and instruction of social-emotional learning. He experienced a teacher who provided valuable lessons for Kyle and all his peers about how to maintain and support friendships. In addition, Mrs. Sowell simultaneously responded directly to Kyle’s need for nurturing support.
Contextual Experiences of Child Well-Being

The context of a supportive and safe learning environment also allowed Kyle to make social and academic strides in his class. The specific ways Kyle experienced child well-being from his preschool teacher are discussed in the sections below. Kyle reported enjoying various aspects of his preschool classroom. He loved playing in the physical space both inside and outdoors. Most significantly, he appeared to enjoy the benefits of a warm classroom culture that fostered citizenship and strong home school connections.

Playful Environments

Many of Kyle’s positive experiences were reported in relation to playing either inside or outdoors. For example, when he and I talked about the various aspects of school he enjoyed, Kyle and I had the following exchange:

Keisha: What do you do with your teacher at school?
Kyle: I play. With toys.

Keisha: Where do you like to play?
Kyle: I like to play in blocks. Build. (child interview April 11, 2019)

For Kyle having his teacher take him to go outside on the playground where he could go on the slide and play basketball, were also things Kyle enjoyed. When asked what the best thing about preschool was, Kyle stated “basketball.” Engaging in movement, physical activity, and outdoor play was a particularly enjoyable aspect of Kyle’s time in preschool. This supports the literature that young children (Pica, 2008), boys (Chu, 2014; Howard et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2017) and particularly Black preschool boys (Morhard, 2013; Sampson, 2010) may prefer physical activity and hands on learning. In addition to creating an indoor classroom environment that facilitated Kyle’s enjoyment of play in his areas of interest such as block area and playing
Bingo in the toys and games area, Mrs. Sowell also created opportunities to extend the classroom outdoors. Outdoor physical activities have been used to promote balance, coordination, creativity, and social-abilities for preschool children (Dodge et al., 2010; Frost & Sutterby, 2017). Ensuring ample time to engage in outdoor gross motor activities, provided opportunities not only to increase enjoyment for Kyle but promote his development.

**Citizenship and Community**

Mrs. Sowell created a responsive learning community within her classroom where the children cared about and supported each other in many ways. In addition, Mrs. Sowell also cultivated positive relationships that extended outside the walls of the classroom. For Kyle, it was significant to have a voice in how things were done in their class. During our interview, when I asked Kyle if there was anything additional he wanted to tell me about his class our exchange went as follows:

Keisha: And is there anything else that you want to tell me about your class?

Kyle: Yes. We make up the rules.

Keisha: You make up rules in your class. What are the rules for your classroom?

Kyle: Friendly hands, and voices quiet, and bodies still (Referring to large group Rules).

(child interview, April 11, 2019)

Kyle also explained during his interview he had a role as a helper who supported his teacher in preparing the beds for naptime in the classroom.

Mrs. Sowell also modeled this care and support by the ways she looked out for the children when they were in school and even when they were not. When I spoke with Kyle’s mother about the reasons that she believed Kyle liked Mrs. Sowell, she commented, “She takes her time with him. She is really nice. And she always calls to check up on him if he is not in
school” (parent interview, April 11, 2019). Mrs. Sowell was responsive to the changes in Kyle’s familial context and the family’s adjustments to a new baby. I speculated that these changes and transitions may have resulted in Kyle arriving late to school or being more emotional about having less time with his mom. The family system also appeared to feel supported and connected to Mrs. Sowell. As affirmed in the literature, Mrs. Sowell’s care and support for Kyle’s adjustment to his family’s growing needs reinforces the need for teachers to develop strong relationships with young children and incorporate knowledge of their changing family situations to improve working relationships with Kyle and his family (Gilliam et al., 2016).

**Summary of the Life Course Perspective of Child Well-Being for Kyle**

Considerations for the power of change through relationships, caused me to contemplate opportunities for educators to be changed in through interactions with Black preschool boys who are quiet or less verbal. The challenge of a child who thinks and communicates in other ways can be difficult for some educators. Often the knowledge, skills, understanding, as well as their intelligence aptitude are incorrectly assessed because of the measures and methods used (NAEYC, 2009; National Institute for Literacy [NIL], 2008). For example, a teacher might incorrectly assume a preschooler does not know the letters of his name simply because he is not able to recall the name of the letter. Yet that same boy may be able to write the letter or accurately when asked or point the letter in a word. The willingness to honor different ways of knowing and being is critical for young children. I wondered if there could be educational valuing of Kyle’s various abilities although he was not always verbally expressive. Kyle’s demeanor as a quiet preschool boy bumped up against the educational way. My own judgments about Kyle as being quiet demonstrated my own privilege as an orator.
My observation of Mrs. Sowell’s honoring of Kyle’s ways of knowing seemed to suggest that children may not always communicate with words. Considering the educational landscape of child well-being for Black preschool boys, I wondered if there is a value for the diverse ways individual children could potentially show advanced skills such as art or music? Would Kyle’s creative or artistic abilities be celebrated in all preschool spaces? Are these abilities valued as the beginning of strong preacademic skills such as literacy, or math (Davis & Farran, 2018; Dodge et al., 2010) or is the focused solely on verbal expression and concrete concepts as a means of measuring intelligence? Are there considerations to explore the various strengths that Black preschool boys and all children possess, or are those strengths and skills only in relation to our standards? These questions caused me to reflect on what Clandinin et al (2010) referred to as, “the dominant stories of schools” (p. 82). Within these stories educators are privileged as experts rather than cocreators of knowledge.

Allowing Kyle to have his time to think and process was a keen and insightful way of supporting Kyle’s academic development. This presented the tension of time which suggests Kyle be experienced both as evolving and in the context of his past experiences. I questioned if educators account for time in the present when there are schedules, timed routines, and assessment requirement? How could preschool educators make room to pause and wait for an answer and wait for children like Kyle to come in to school? Is there room in the current educational way of doing and assessing to make time for understanding children’s learning as a process? Formative assessment is a way to understand a child’s current and next step in learning and can be a critical tool in helping preschool teachers enhance learning and development (Mangione, Osborne, & Mendenhall, 2019). As I reflected on each instance (our interview and in class) of waiting and allowing more time for Kyle, the results were two noteworthy products. As
I considered our connection, Kyle’s creation of the “monster trapezoid,” and his experience of the “four leaf clover,” I paused to celebrate the ways that giving the gift of time to young children, can in turn become a gift to ourselves.

**Meet Hakeem: Nurturer**

I introduce Hakeem as a nurturer (see Figure 8), who helped and cared for both peers and adults. Hakeem’s narrative highlighted his experience of a teacher who supported his individual need for independence and autonomy. His narrative revealed ways Hakeem benefitted from a relationship with a supportive and accepting adult. His experience underscores the significance of attending to the physical space as a method for enhancing experiences of child well-being.

**Figure 8**

*Illustration of a Preschool Boy with Characteristics Similar to Hakeem*


On my first visit to Mrs. Sowell’s preschool classroom I remembered the warm, welcoming greeting I received from Hakeem. He had a head full of short thick locks, light-brown
skin, and a pudgy-cheeked smile. His bright searching eyes were simultaneously filled with care, curiosity, and an inclusive acceptance. As if I were a new preschool child, starting her first day of school, Hakeem welcomed me to his classroom. He presented with an eagerness that seemed to suggest, I am here to help you and it will be OK. After Mrs. Sowell introduced me to the class, he took my hand and led me to the circle for large group meeting which was where everyone would meet to start the day. He waited patiently as I contemplated if I should sit on the rug with him and the other children, or on a chair like the other adults in the room. I decided to sit next to him, as he called me over and pointed to the letter V on the colorful carpet with all the letters of the alphabet along the perimeter. There was a vacant spot to the right of him, “Sit here,” he gently directed (field notes, March 14, 2019). After I sat, Hakeem demonstrated how I should sit by prompting me to join him on the rug in a cross-legged position, which Mrs. Sowell referred to as “slant.” He then showed me how to place my fingers in a meditative pose and repeat after Mrs. Sowell as she finished reciting each verse of her morning meditation, the children echoed each phrase with confidence in unison, I am kind, I am smart, I will say kind words to my friends. Breathe in, breathe out (field notes, March 14, 2019). I recalled Hakeem’s watchful eyes waiting to see if I would utter the lines correctly. He smiled and then, put his index finger on his lips as a signal this was a time where I was supposed to be quiet.

The first day during choice time, Hakeem insisted that I play with him in the dramatic play area, we pretended to drive in a car to the grocery store and buy food for the brown baby dolls. He would then direct me to, “Be the mother” and “Hold on to the baby” (field notes, March 14, 2019). Our pretend car consisted of two chairs pushed together in front of a miniature sofa, which served as the back seat. When he stepped out of our “car” we excitedly walked into “the store.” This pretend store was a shelf in the dramatic play area which contained cereal
boxes, milk cartons, and other household items. A short time later, Jason joined us in our play. Jason spoke sternly and demanded that we both, “Behave and be good!” or else we would have to stay in the car. He wanted us to transition from the pretend play that Hakeem and I were engaged in to do something else. Jason attempted to redirect our play as he bopped his head to some unknown beat and held up his hand to form a pretend microphone, he suggested, “Let’s make a music video” (field notes, March 14, 2019). But Hakeem ignored his request as he steadily maintained his focus on the dramatic play we had already begun. Hakeem seemed determined to play out his role and continued driving our car to the next store. As the three of us talked about all the things we needed to get from the store which included milk, cookies, potato chips, and ice-cream- the pretend car ride became more exciting. Finally, Jason abandoned the idea of the music video and joined our play as another family member along for the ride. However, he insisted on being in the front seat of the car, so I gladly took the back seat all to myself, and off we went (field notes, March 14, 2019).

As if there was an established yet unspoken routine, during each subsequent visit to the classroom, Hakeem would excitedly greet me and invite me to play with him in the dramatic play area, just as he did on that first day (field notes, March 14, 2019; April 4, 2019; April 11, 2019; April 15, 2019; May 9, 2019; May 22, 2019, & June 13, 2019). It seemed that dramatic play was his favorite area during choice time. There in his world of play, he was a caretaker, a provider, a supporter, and a nurturer who took care of, and was in charge of people, places, and things. My experience of Hakeem over the few months in his class suggested these were roles he seemed to readily assume in real life as well. I was curious if Hakeem’s characteristics were celebrated or required in all his environments. I wondered if he was encouraged to take care of the baby, cook, and clean in other settings. I considered the tension of context and how ideas of
being a boy and masculinity develop for young Black boys in school. I was curious about the influences of other people and if being a nurturer and caretaker bumped up against his identities as a Black, preschool boy. As I considered how Hakeem may be making sense of his world and his place in the world, I reflected on the kinds of messages or silences, he received about displaying the actions of a nurturer.

**Being in Relation With Others**

Hakeem’s way of showing kindness, concern, and support for others seemed to extend to everyone around him. My experience of Hakeem suggested he wanted to make sure both children and adults were okay. He also seemed to notice when others were not doing well and when things were out of order, new, or different in his classroom environment. During our interview, Hakeem volunteered information about a child in class who’s off task behavior was disruptive during story read-a-loud, “Cierra wasn’t listening. Because she took off her shoes and socks just now. We was reading a book, just now. And Mrs. Sowell got mad” (child interview, April 15, 2019). During another classroom visit, Hakeem was eagerly waiting for me at the door. As he greeted me, he excitedly showed me all the new toys Mrs. Sowell had recently brought to the classroom. He then told me about Cierra’s new book-bag (field notes, June 13, 2019). I reflected about Hakeem’s frequent noticing and attention to Cierra, the tension of action caused me to wonder about Hakeem’s behavior. I was curious if his extra care and attention towards Cierra may have been based on some of Cierra’s special needs. Cierra was a preschool child with an individualized educational plan (IEP). I did not observe Cierra communicating with words nor was I clear about the reasons why Cierra was not able to speak. She communicated with everyone using gestures and utterances, pointing, and at times bringing you to the objects she wanted you to notice or a book she wanted you to read. All the children, including Hakeem,
seemed to enjoy playing with her and included her as a member of their class community. This tension of *action* caused me to wonder if in his own way, Hakeem may have been looking out for another child in class who he believed needed his help and support.

Hakeem lived with both his mother, father, and older brother. It was his father who was typically most responsive to my outreach efforts and phone calls. During my weekly trips to the school, Hakeem’s father would be the family member who I observed pick him up and bring him to school. Although I had some communication with his mother and grandmother, it was his dad who ultimately gave initial consent for Hakeem to participate in the study, and who accompanied him to the interview. In my search to find Hakeem’s role models of men who were nurturers, I did not have to look very far. Yet the tension of *people* caused me to wonder how much of Hakeem’s way of being was attributed to his experience of a paternal role model, his own way of being, or some other influential factor. During a later visit to his classroom, Hakeem shared what I believe may have been a special treat for him. He greeted me and held his right wrist towards my face:

Hakeem: Smell my new cologne.

Keisha: Hmmm, smells nice. Who bought you cologne?

Hakeem: My dad. No, smell it again. (field notes, June 13, 2019)

I later questioned if like wearing his cologne, there were other ways Hakeem may have been trying to emulate his dad.

Over the course of the months I spent in Mrs. Sowell’s class there were moments, where I recalled being curious about comments Hakeem would make. One such instance was during my visit on June 13, 2019. While Hakeem and I were playing in the dramatic play area, he made a
comment which I did not question during that moment of play. Later upon reflection, I would have liked to learn more about the certainty or meaning of his comment.

Hakeem: (Brings pretend money over from the cash register. Handing the pretend dollars to Keisha). Here take this.

Keisha: Thanks. I don’t need anymore.

Hakeem: Don’t you want to be rich?

Keisha: Shrugs

Hakeem: I have this from the bank, but I didn’t steal it though. (field notes, June 13, 2019)

The tension of temporality consumed me as I reviewed this moment wanting to go back in time and be more present in that moment to possibly learn more about Hakeem’s prior experiences with money? What had he come to understand during his 4 years of life about its value for him and his life? Did he have prior experiences (historical time) where he was accused of stealing money? Was this the reason he felt the need to defend himself to me in that moment of play (present experience)? Did he have hopes to become rich in the future to give money to others (implied future)? In what ways did money factor into his role as one who nurtures and supports others?

I was curious about Hakeem’s way of relating to others. It appeared there were many factors involved in his developing sense of self and relational well-being. Hakeem appeared to look up to his father and want to emulate some of his behaviors. He seemed to want to connect with others, and yet there were very few occasions when I observed Hakeem playing with the other children. He seemed to most often be on the periphery, looking out for others, helping, and interacting with adults. I wondered about my role in this context. Did my presence in the class
cause Hakeem to feel the need to attend to me, a visiting adult who needed to be welcomed? I was curious about the meaning of this behavior for a young preschool boy. As I reflected on Hakeem’s relationships with others, including his family, his peers, his teachers, and with me, I considered the dynamic interplay of these relational experiences. I wondered how they combined with Hakeem’s natural temperament to create what I understood to be his experience of child well-being as a nurturer.

**Being in Relation With Mrs. Sowell**

While Hakeem’s father thought his son liked Mrs. Sowell in part because she always had “Good snacks” (parent interview, April 15, 2019). Hakeem reported other appealing aspects about his teacher. When I spoke with Hakeem about the things he liked to do with Mrs. Sowell, we had the following exchange:

Hakeem: I like to do wit Mrs. Sowell, is read books. I like to play puppets. I write numbers.

Keisha: Okay. So read books, play puppets, and write numbers with Mrs. Sowell.

Hakeem: (Interjects) She comes in and I play in the kitchen wit her.

Keisha: Oh, you do play in the kitchen area with Mrs. Sowell? Okay. And what about Mrs. Walters do you.

Hakeem: (Interjects) Sometimes Mrs. Sowell. Comes in the kitchen; sometimes Mrs. Walters comes in.

Keisha: Oh, sometimes Mrs. Walters comes in there and plays with you too? Okay. And tell me, do you do anything fun with your teachers?

Hakeem: I do. I help them.
Keisha: You help them. Help them do what?
Hakeem: Clean.

Keisha: You help them clean up and is that fun? (Nods affirmatively) Okay.

Keisha: And what are some things that your teacher does that makes you laugh?
Hakeem: She reads a story and she takes us outside and we scream. (Hakeem, child interview, April 15, 2019)

It was also significant to me that he seemed comfortable and reported enjoying his experience of helping to clean and attending to the needs of others, even those who were older.

During his interview when I asked if there was anything that Mrs. Sowell did that made him happy, Hakeem and I had the following exchange:

Keisha: So, does Mrs. Sowell ever do anything that makes you happy?
Hakeem: U-huh (Affirmative).
Keisha: What does she do that makes you happy?
Hakeem: I just told you.
Keisha: (Smiling) You told me that she lets you go outside, and it makes you laugh, but is there something that she does that makes you feel happy?
Hakeem: Yes.

Keisha: What?
Hakeem: She zips me up, my coat up. (Hakeem, child interview, April 15, 2019)

For Hakeem receiving nurturing as well as providing nurturing support for others was enjoyable. He experienced relational well-being by helping his teachers as well as having his teachers provide help with tasks like zipping up his coat. I would have more exposure to the depth and breadth of Hakeem’s nurturing abilities during my child interview with him.
Caring for the Physical Space

Hakeem was the fifth child that I would interview. Hakeem would intentionally seek me out to play with him during each visit to his classroom. I felt he and I had built a solid rapport and connection throughout the weeks leading up to our interview. He was accompanied by his father and older brother to our after-school talk. Throughout the interview, it became increasingly apparent that Hakeem was very focused on the physical space, the function, and aesthetics of this different yet similar classroom environment. He also appeared to be intent on making sure that others were aware and perhaps introduced to the space. This became evident during the initial seconds of our talk before the interview began:

Hakeem: Wait hold up. I’m gonna go talk to my brother (moved across the room to speak to his older brother).
Keisha: Wait, what are you gonna say to your brother (chuckling). Okay?
Hakeem: (Gets up and walks over to his older brother- sitting with his father across the room and whispers to him). (Walking back towards the table where he and I sat for the interview) I told him I like it better than the other one. (His own class).
Keisha: Why do you like it better than the other one?
Hakeem: Because it has a lot of toys. (Hakeem, child interview, April 15, 2019)

Initially, I was unphased by Hakeem’s attention to the details of the physical environment in his classroom. However, I would later learn more about this aspect of who he was as an individual. His eye for detail was a different way of experiencing preschool boys for me. Hakeem wanted to explain the layout and the differences of this classroom from his own classroom to his older brother and seemed to comment most on the physical space in his conversations about his classroom.
Keisha: So, tell me about your classroom though. Where do you like to play?

Hakeem: I like to play in dramatic play. Like over there (Points to the dramatic play area).

Keisha: Like in the area there. What do you do there?

Hakeem: I cook.

Keisha: You cook? Okay. And who plays there with you?

Hakeem: Erin, Jason, and Nashawn. (Hakeem, child interview, April 15, 2019)

In addition to his attention to detail of the physical space, during our conversation, Hakeem seemed to have readily available insight about what it meant to care for someone. Our exchange went as follows:

Keisha: So, do you know what it means to care about somebody? (Nods affirmatively). What does it mean when you care about somebody?

Hakeem: When you help them feel better.

Keisha: Exactly right. Yes. You got it exactly right.

Hakeem: Exactly.

Keisha: So, does your teacher care about you?

Hakeem: Yes

Keisha: How do you know? How do you know she cares about you?

Hakeem: Because she’s my teacher.

Keisha: Because she’s your teacher. But what does she do to let you know that she cares about you?

Hakeem: She helps us clean up.

Keisha: Because she helps you clean up? Okay.
Hakeem: (Interjects) The areas. (Hakeem, child interview, April 15, 2019)

As a child who was focused on helping, caring for and supporting others, it appeared that it was also important to Hakeem the physical space was clean, well-stocked with all the needed supplies, and he was excited when new or different items were added to the space. He also reported enjoying his role as a helper to his teachers in caring for the physical space. Hakeem presented as a naturally empathic helper. I understood this to mean maintaining the space and attending to his own self-help needs such as zipping up his coat, were also a way for him to experience care.

As I reflected on Hakeem’s experience of child well-being as a member of Mrs. Sowell’s preschool class, I was initially somewhat perplexed. The tension of certainty caused me to question the ways Hakeem experienced child well-being. I struggled to maintain his authentic voice and not to “write-over” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.141) Hakeem’s experience with my own. I wondered if this preschool boy was in fact authentically enjoying helping, fixing, cleaning, and caring. I reflected on Mrs. Sowell’s practices and wondered if they were conscious and deliberate? Did she allow for the children to lead their selection based on their interests, choices, and desires? Did she support flexibility and nontraditional ways of thinking about gender roles in her classroom? I was curious if Mrs. Sowell’s flexibility fostered or influenced Hakeem’s identity development in school? How did Hakeem benefit by having a teacher who intentionally celebrated his choice. Did this experience of attending a preschool with a state-approved curriculum which encouraged choices based on strengths, an experience that allowed Hakeem and to feel accepted and affirmed? As I explored the various considerations of child well-being, I uncovered new ways to think about his experience.
Individual Experiences of Child Well-Being: Fostering Autonomy

According to yourdictionary.com (2019), the definition of a nurturer reads, “A nurturer is someone who provides food or care. An example of a nurturer is a mother feeding her baby.” This was an explicit illustration of how societal standards and values bumped up against who Hakeem had presented himself to be as a Black preschool boy. In contrast to the “defined” description of a nurturer, Hakeem was a boy and he was a child. Considerations for his age as a 4-year-old boy caused me to wonder to reflect on how he might benefit from helping, supporting, and caring. I also pondered on the process of Hakeem’s developing identity as a boy and what it means to be a Black boy. Did his way of being align or deviate from society’s “gender-scripting” (Chu, 2014) of what boys “should” do and where they “should” play? I was also curious about the experiences which fostered Hakeem’s caregiving role as boy who was the youngest in his family.

I later reflected on whether Hakeem’s behavior or choices were based on adult opinions, needs, or biases. I reviewed to data generated from my child and parent interviews as well as my in class-observations to understand his experience of well-being revealed. It was evident in Mrs. Sowell’s classroom, Hakeem was allowed to be himself rather than conform to societal ideals about what it meant to be a boy and a preschooler. Yet, I still found myself wondering if Hakeem’s needs were being met? Did he actually experience child well-being as a preschool boy who enjoyed supporting and helping others? I further speculated on whether Hakeem was possibly experiencing parentification (Byng, 2008; Van Parys & Rober, 2013) where children take on adult roles due to parental dependency (Engelhardt, 2012). However, to answer the question of his experience, I returned to the subjective nature of child well-being and considered Hakeem’s responses to the questions I asked regarding his likes, the things he reported
experiencing as fun, and the things which made him feel happy. I also reflected on the matters he seemed to instinctively attend to and the details he seemed to be inclined to talk about and to share with me during our encounters. As I considered the tension of context, it became increasingly apparent Hakeem was in fact being allowed to develop and grow in ways which affirmed the interests, choices, and activities he enjoyed.

Perhaps the challenge in acknowledging this as well-being said more about my adult privilege and posture than it did about Hakeem. I considered the ways being in a role of helping and supporting might allow Hakeem to experience child well-being. How this role could be empowering for a Black preschool boy who was trying to make sense of his world and his place in it. The research suggests for Hakeem this experience may have also fostered a sense of agency, independence, and self-confidence (NRCIM, 2000). I had my own biases or opinions about when, how, and the extent to which Hakeem “should” help and support others as a child. However, the data was clear, this was what he enjoyed. Exploring his relational experiences of child well-being required further analysis and consideration of the tensions of certainty and action.

Relational Experiences of Child Well-Being: Connection and Acceptance

Hakeem’s father commented that his son seemed to have what he described as, “A good connection with all his teachers so far” (parent interview, April 15, 2019). Different from the other boys I observed in his class, Hakeem seemed to seek out adult attention and require their engagement and connection. Not in a boastful or demanding way, more accurately his solicitation seemed to suggest a request for connection. A noted difference among Hakeem and the other boys with whom I spoke was that he did not seem to identify the other children in his classroom as his peers. Instead, he talked about playing with them and seemed to do his best to
make sure they were all doing well. As I considered my time with Hakeem in Mrs. Sowell’s class, I would later wonder if Hakeem saw himself as more connected to and aligned with an adult way of being than with his same age peers. I also pondered on why this may have been the case for Hakeem. I also questioned whether the relational experiences with his same age peers did not meet his needs for nurturing and support in the same way his adult connections did? I was curious if Mrs. Sowell recognized this aspect of Hakeem’s interactions.

I later reflected on that first day when Jason tried to shift our play to making a music video. I reflected on how focused Hakeem was on carrying out his task of going to the store. I considered the ways peer and societal influences can shift or alter direction and or require individuals question their identity. Hakeem presented with confidence and comfort in his play interests in play. I had not observed Mrs. Sowell redirect Hakeem to select another area or dissuade him from helping. I wondered if Hakeem’s behavior and way of being would have consistently been nurtured and celebrated if he had a different teacher. Perhaps Mrs. Sowell’s acceptance of Hakeem’s interest and his choices fostered Hakeem’s confidence, autonomy, and security to take on experiences in his own way. In essence, Mrs. Sowell’s acceptance of Hakeem’s interests, autonomy, and his choice of play challenged both the “gendered construction” (Bryan, 2020, p. 21) of his play and interest as a Black preschool boy. However, for Hakeem, this practice also enhanced his experience of child well-being as it celebrated his freedom, creativity, and independence as a preschool boy.

**Contextual Experiences of Child Well-Being: A Nurturing Environment**

I was surprised by Hakeem’s focus and attention to the physical space. My colleague would often say the environment is the third and silent teacher in the room (Carolyn Morris-Teacher Coach- in discussion with the author, October 2019). During almost all my experiences
with Hakeem, he would comment or highlight some aspect of the physical space. Hakeem was not only concerned with the appearance of the physical space, he attended to what occurred in the space, how it cared for, and how others felt in the space. Mrs. Sowell’s practice had also set the stage for the classroom environment to be a warm welcoming place where care was valued and expected as evidenced by her daily morning affirmation, “I am kind, I am smart, I will say kind words to my friends. Breathe in, breathe out.” However, when I asked Hakeem if he felt safe, he and I had the following exchange.

Keisha: So, do you feel safe in your classroom?

Hakeem: Yes, but when we have a fire drill we don’t.

Keisha: But when you have a fire drill how do you feel? You don’t feel safe, how do you feel?

Hakeem: I don’t feel safe.

I reflected on the many ways Hakeem experienced child well-being in the context of his preschool classroom by being part of a nurturing and accepting classroom environment where he was allowed to have autonomy in exploring his interests. I was curious about the aspects of a fire-drill that may have been unsettling, or perhaps frightening, or out of control for Hakeem. My reflection on the tensions of temporality action caused me to question if this preschool boy may have previously experienced a fire at some point in his young life. I then considered the ways adults could make room for necessary routines such as fire-drills and school lockdowns to be less intimidating and emotionally safe for preschool children.

**Summary of the Life Course Perspective of Child Well-Being for Hakeem**

Considerations for the life course perspective highlighted important elements of contexts both within a broader societal sense as well as the specific physical space of the classroom.
Namely, this viewpoint caused me to reflect on the ways schools can often dictate gender roles, limit identities, and place age-related restrictions on children based on societal standards or expectations (Bryan, 2019; Howard et al., 2013). These early learning experiences may then shape the life trajectory for Black preschool boys (Rashid, 2009). I experienced Hakeem’s behavior as a display of kindness, support, and nurturing towards others and his behavior appeared be supported in Mrs. Sowell’s class. However, Hakeem’s ways of being may not have been affirmed in other learning environments. In some classrooms his behavior may have been discouraged or viewed as negative even in his efforts to connect with adults. I reflected on the ways societal norms, expectation, or biases can limit the expression of some behaviors related to nurturing for young Black boys (i.e., doing household chores or playing with dolls) while affirming other behaviors (i.e., aggression or involvement in sports) (Howard et al., 2013). Teacher perceptions of behaviors are linked to suspension and expulsion rates for Black preschool boys (Gilliam et al., 2016).

I questioned how early childhood educators could be more reflective of implicit bias and the role of bias in hindering or supporting the engagement and expectations with Black preschool boys in the educational context (Bryan, 2017; Dodge et al., 2010; Gilliam et al., 2016). The tension of context requires consideration for the influence of time, place, and other people in an experience (Clandinin et al., 2010). Early childhood educators are called to foster a, “safe and reflective space for children to develop their identities and counterbalance gender stereotypes” (Feeney et al., 2019, p. 84). To better support child-driven interests, educators may need to reflect on our ideas about gender roles and age-related abilities to ensure those ideas do not dictate perceptions and responses to children’s behaviors (Bryan, 2019; Dodge et al., 2010).
For Hakeem, the physical space had a profound impact on his preschool experience of child well-being. This new discovery highlighted consideration for all the aspects involved in creating a nurturing and supportive learning environment where children feel accepted and welcomed. This perspective requires attention to the big and small details of the physical space and promotion of an environment that reflects a community of diverse learners, interests, and choices (Ostrosky & Meadan, 2010). This led to considerations of how to create a responsive and diverse classroom environment for Black preschool boys to engage in activities and experiences which celebrate their individuality and meet their growing and developing needs (Dodge et al., 2010).

**Epilogue**

Although, I would return for other follow-ups, my last official day at Glenside that school year was on June 18, 2019. This was the day of the “Moving-up Ceremony,” a day where family and friends would gather to witness the transition for the children as they celebrated all the accomplishments of their child’s preschool year. The children sang two songs and shared from the from the stage in the school’s auditorium. It was Christopher and Erin who would begin, “This school year we learned about many things. Insects, Signs, Simple Machines, Sand, Tubes and Tunnels” (field notes, June 18, 2019). Children from other classes would follow reciting specifics facts from the studies. After the 10-minute program concluded, all the families gathered in individual classrooms for a light snack as they took pictures with their teachers and friends and enjoyed the festivities. The children all wore the same white and blue T-shirts and the teachers all wore matching yellow T-shirts. Christopher and Nashawn moved about the room beaming with excitement. I did not see Kyle or his family at the ceremony that day. I stood in the background taking in the joy of the moment and my own secret sadness this was the “end.”
Hakeem suddenly appeared held my hand, pointed to his new shirt, and proudly announced to me, “Today is my graduation.” I nodded, smiled, told him I was proud of him, and walked over to briefly greet his family before leaving the school.

When I returned to visit the school in September 2019 and meet the new administrators, I learned Kyle had moved to a different school on the other side of town. Hakeem transitioned to a charter school and Christopher and Nashawn were placed in the same kindergarten class. As I passed by their new class to see the boys sitting in rows and reciting numbers out-loud, I thought of how much had changed in only a few short months. I smiled as I thought fondly of the time I was gifted to spend in their preschool class and what each boy had taught me. I mustered up feelings of hope about their educational trajectory ahead. Before existing, I stopped in to visit Mrs. Sowell. She was already replicating the community-like atmosphere I had experienced in her class during the previous year. She seemed eager, excited, and already getting to know her new preschool children. I felt relieved she had returned to be present for a new class. As I pondered on the distinct differences between this preschool and the kindergarten classroom I had just left, I tried to focus on a positive memory from the Moving-Up Ceremony. The recollection of the quote written on the bright yellow T-shirts which all the teachers wore, seemed to adequately capture the moment, *It’s Pre-K, like a regular teacher, only more magical.*

**Looking Across the Narratives**

I introduce the notion of the counterstory: a story that contributes to the moral and self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations and conclusions. Counterstories can be told anywhere, but particularly when told within chosen communities, they permit their tellers
to reenter, as full citizens, the communities of place whose goods have been only imperfectly available to its marginalized members. (Hilde Lindemann Nelson, 1995)

**A Counterstory of Experiences of Child Well-Being for Black Preschool Boys**

As I constructed the narratives of child well-being of four Black preschool boys - Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem who all attended a state-funded program in a large urban district in New Jersey, I reflected on how I have been transformed by the process. My interactions and discoveries have alerted me to many of my own misconceptions and faulty ways of thinking about and attempting to understand young children in general and specifically Black preschool boys, and their experiences. In Chapter 4, I offered rich narrative constructions of each child as an individual, in relation to others, and specifically in relation to his teacher Mrs. Sowell. As I spent time with the boys within the context of the state-funded preschool classroom, I discovered unique abilities, strengths, gifts and talents emerging from within each boy. I also discovered common themes around their experiences of child well-being. These common themes do not reflect new or profound discoveries. More accurately, I believe these experiences may highlight the general “imperfect availability” of these practices for Black preschool boys based on misperceptions about who they are and what their behaviors may signify, as evident in the nationwide data of suspension and expulsion (DOE Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Across the narratives each child was valued as an individual, they each shared and recalled moments of playful connections with Mrs. Sowell, each child’s family reported experiencing positive relationships with Mrs. Sowell, and the boys each expressed a sense of belonging by being part of a community. Each theme is described below (see Figure 9).
Valued as Individuals

Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem each presented their own distinct interests, temperaments, relational styles, gifts, and talents. Their interactions and my understanding of their experiences with Mrs. Sowell suggested that she accepted and valued their unique ways of knowing and doing.

Experiencing Playful Connections

Play was a common activity experienced by all four boys and described as a fun and enjoyable way to connect with their teachers. Nashawn who loved to laugh and be tickled by his teacher and make silly faces; Kyle reported enjoying games like Bingo, Christopher who had fun making structures and Hakeem who even as a helper loved to go outside, run around, and scream.

Positive Home-School Connections

Evident in all the conversations with parents were elements of positive regard and support for Mrs. Sowell and Mrs. Walters as caregivers, teachers, supporters, and advocates for their sons. This positive rapport and connection also enhanced their experience of well-being.

Experiencing Community

Within the context of the classroom each boy experienced being a valued member of Mrs. Sowell’s classroom. As I understood their experiences each boy appeared to see himself as a valued participant within the classroom community whose contributions, efforts, and opinions mattered to the group. Kyle shared examples of making up the classroom rules and helping with the beds at rest-time, Christopher’s opinions and skills were revered by both peers and adults, Nashawn relished the support of his friends, and Hakeem saw himself as a valued helper in his class. I understood this collective communal support for each member of Mrs. Sowell’s class was
celebrated and instrumental to the daily functioning of the classroom in general and made the experience of being in Mr. Sowell’s class a welcoming place to be.

**Figure 9**

*Understanding of Common Experiences of Child Well-Being for Black Preschool Boys*
Chapter 5: Discussion

Research exploring the educational experiences of Black boys in state-funded preschool programs has been limited. A review of the literature revealed Black boys in the early stages of their educational trajectory encounter significant relational challenges with their teachers. These challenges are influenced by their race and gender (Gilliam et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017). This narrative inquiry, guided by life course theory (Elder, 1998), focused on exploring the experiences of child well-being of four Black preschool boys.

In Chapter 4, I outlined my interpretation of the data and shared the unique experiences of child well-being relayed by Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem through their constructed narratives. Across all four narratives, specific experiences of child well-being emerged as common themes. These findings indicated all four boys experienced being valued as individuals, playful connections, positive home-school connections, and the benefits of community within their classroom environment. In this chapter, I share findings relative to the broader educational context and outline specific contributions to the extant literature for life course theory, the child well-being framework, and narrative methodology. In addition, I also outline various implications for educational practice and policy within the realm of state-funded preschool programs and make recommendations for future educational research.

Learning from Preschool-Aged Black Boys About Their Experiences of Child Well-Being

The critical aim and purpose of this study was to hear the perspectives Black preschool boys who were attending a state-funded program. Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem were able to adequately share the positive and enjoyable experiences they had with their preschool teacher Mrs. Sowell. State-funded preschool programs have been in existence for
several decades and have yielded many positive benefits such as increased academic achievement and reduced involvement in the criminal justice system (Pungello et al., 2010). However, it was important to facilitate research with young children and hear their real-time perspectives on their current school experiences while they are happening. Understanding their experiences of child well-being may increase validity by reducing recall bias (Sheik, 2018) when data are obtained during later years from older children or adults. Gathering real-time data and learning from preschool boys about what matters most in their relational child-teacher experiences allows us to build on strengths for subsequent years.

Black boys have been marginalized within the educational system for decades (Noguera, 2008) and these challenges begin in preschool (Gilliam et al., 2016). Accordingly, exploring the beginning of their educational journey is both a relevant and critical place to understand how they make sense of their experiences in the early schooling years. Knowledge gained from Black preschool boys offers important insight regarding relational considerations that matter to them as individuals. This information provides teachers with a relevant understanding “what works” for engaging Black preschool boys in early learning environments. Considerations for how this new knowledge may enhance teacher-child relationships promote school engagement for Black preschool boys are further discussed within the implications section of this chapter.

As I reflect on how I have been changed by this new knowledge, I pose the questions, how can key stakeholders respond to this knowledge and how can this information be educative, (Dewey, 1938) and is there room for change? The various complexities of new knowledge gained through this research underscore the distinct and unique individual, relational, and contextual experiences of Kyle, Christopher, Hakeem, and Nashawn. Accordingly, I reify the shared understanding, illustrated in the findings of this research, Black preschool boys are not a
“homogeneous or monolithic” (NBCDI, 2015, p. 22) group and their experiences of child well-being should not be interpreted as such.

**Contributions to the Existing Literature**

The existing research on Black boys during the early learning years reflects their relational experiences from the perspectives of significant others such as teachers, parents, and administrators (Barbarin, 2013; Wood et al., 2017). To date, very few studies in the US have explored the subjective experiences of Black preschool boys of their teachers within the state-funded context. Current findings provide a unique contribution to the existing literature by focusing on the often-silenced voices of Black preschool boys. This new perspective will enhance our understanding of the practices they believe are instrumental for supporting their well-being earlier in the educational trajectory.

The four boys in this study shared the importance of connected play as a contributing factor in their experience of well-being. They each expressed their enjoyment for engaging in play related activities with Mrs. Sowell. Play is a vital tool for connection and teaching during the preschool years (Bergen, 2018; Early et al., 2010). The importance of play (Dodge et al., 2010) and in particular kinesthetic learning activities in school (Early et al., 2010) have consistently been affirmed in the literature as an educational practice which enhanced the well-being for young children and specifically young Black boys (Morhard, 2013; Sampson, 2010). The current research finding is consistent with previous literature acknowledging the importance of play as a tool for increasing engagement for preschool children (Early et al., 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008). Additionally, this new child-centered perspective highlights the importance of play as a critical tool for enhancing relational connection.
The importance of positive home-school relationships were expressed across all parent interviews and confirm prior research regarding the benefits of collaborative and supportive relationships with families of young children in order to best support their educational development (Gilliam et al., 2016; NRCIM, 2000). Similarly, facilitating a community of learners has been established as a culturally responsive teaching tool relevant for engaging older Black boys (Boykin et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The current research finding regarding the importance of a supportive learning environment suggests the presence of community is also a relevant factor the preschool experience for Black boys. The care and support shown by Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem for the general well-being of their classmates and each other, highlight the power and benefits of fostering a nurturing learning environment within the preschool classroom environment. Mrs. Sowell’s demonstration of care, empathy, and working cooperatively as important values within the classroom context, allowed the boys to experience the benefits of a preschool classroom that “nurtured social competence” (Dodge et al., 2010, p. 144). Collectively, this research highlights the early years of development is a critical time to build on relational strengths by fostering and supporting social-emotional skills for young Black boys to enhance their experiences in preschool.

**Life Course Theory and Considerations for Black Preschool Boys**

Life course is a human development theory focused on the interplay between contexts and relationships in the life of individuals at various stages of development (Elder, 1998). My analysis explored key principles of *historical time and place, linked lives,* and *timing* as principles for understanding the contextual, relational, and individual experiences of child well-being for Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem.
Historical Time and Place

A historical context requires educators to consider the link between how Black boys and men have and continue to be criminalized in society and the discipline disparities and marginalization they encounter in school (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Wright & Counsell, 2018). These oppressive structures exist in society to vilify and dehumanize even very young Black boys (Bryan, 2020; Rowley et al., 2014). Findings from this current study suggest the narratives of Black preschool boys like Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem must also be constructed with a shared understanding of the oppressive and repressive structures within which they are developing, persisting, and daring to thrive. Opportunities for Black boys to be understood, supported, connected, and engaged in preschools must not be void of a contextualized historical perspective of their challenges within the educational context.

Linked Lives

Given our early experiences are shaped in positive or negative ways by relational connections (Elder, 1998), this study intentionally focused on the principle of linked or connected lives. This focus facilitated an exploration of how the preschool experiences of four Black boys were shaped by their connection with Mrs. Sowell. Mrs. Sowell’s practice of taking time to get to know each boy as an individual and meet his unique developmental, relational, and cultural needs, illustrated the significant role positive teacher-child relationships had for each boy’s experience of well-being. Mrs. Sowell connected with the boys individually by understanding their need for community, recognizing their individual strengths and abilities, and honoring their enjoyment of play.

Hearing from the boys about what mattered most to them in this relational dyad was insightful. This new understanding of the principle of linked or connected lives calls into
question whether Black boys in preschool have been able to consistently realize the benefits associated with linked or connected relationships in ways that matter most to them in preschool? Or, are educators more likely to employ practices that speak only to their own adult, gendered, and racialized ways of engaging and building connections? In essence, are Black preschool boys consistently having their relational needs met in ways that matter to them? If the early educational experiences of Black preschool boys are to positively shape their future educational trajectories, educators must be specific and intentional about how they make connections with younger Black boys.

As shared from the narratives of Nashawn, Kyle, Christopher, and Hakeem, they are all unique individuals. Accordingly, efforts to build beneficial connections must reflect a willingness on the part of the educator to learn and understand the child’s unique interests, family backgrounds, and ways of being. This may require learning about their extracurricular activities, culturally specific values, interests, and finding nontraditional ways to connect with the boys and their families (Nelson, 2016). Preschool educators must also be willing to connect in ways that matter most to the Black preschool boys they encounter to build positive relational connections. As noted in prior research, when teachers have strong relational connections with young children, they are less likely to see their behavior as challenging (Graves & Howes, 2011).

Although not an initial focus of this research, the principle of linked or connected lives was also relevant in both teacher-child relationships as well as peer relationships. Interviews and observations with Nashawn and Kyle in particular, illustrated how strong supportive peer relationships augmented their experience of child well-being. In addition to teach-child relationships, peer relationships are also an important consideration for early childhood experiences (Ostrosky & Meadan, 2010). Helping young children develop positive peer
relationships in school aids in their sense of belonging and enhances their experience of child
well-being in preschool (Dodge et al., 2010; Lippman et al., 2011). Mrs. Sowell emerged as a
supportive adult who was intentional (Howard et al., 2013) in the ways she fostered positive peer
relationships for the preschool children in her classroom. Findings from this study point towards
the importance of the teacher-child relational connection as a critical relationship for enhancing
peer relationships starting in preschool.

**Timing**

The first 5 years of life are particularly critical for all aspects of learning and
development for young children (CDCHU, 2015). The early stages of development matter and
have significant implications for how a child approaches their future educational experiences
(Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; CDCHU, 2015). Time is crucial in the life course perspective and
particularly relevant with regard to age (Gee et al., 2019). Understanding of the experiences of
Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem required a need to attend to the principle of *timing*
(Elder, 1998) as they engaged in preschool during a specific developmental stage. Narrative
construction brought an awareness of the need to take hold of this boyhood stage of development
for Black preschool boys (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and acknowledged their critical
developmental needs as they entered preschool.

Data reflecting disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates for Black
preschool boys (DOE Office of Civil Rights, 2014) point towards a need for early childhood
educators to understand developmentally appropriate behaviors of 4-year-old boys and respond
accordingly. Age-appropriate behaviors and ways of being for Black preschool boys are often
not contextualized as typical 4-year-old actions. Subsequently, because they are often viewed as
older and less innocent (Goff et al., 2014), the behaviors of Black preschool boys often are
assigned consequences of older boys or men (Bryan, 2017). The boys in Mrs. Sowell’s class experience child well-being because she allowed the boys to engage in age-appropriate behaviors such as needing time to produce an answer to questions or making silly faces with peers. This practice required a delicate balance of attending to educational demands of preschool and simultaneously meeting developmental needs. The life course principle of timing recclaims this nurture-dependent, playful, time-warranted, stage of development, and begins a contextualization process which allows Black boys the freedom to be children and to succeed.

As illustrated in this study, the choices and practices of their preschool teacher were instrumental for providing experiences of child well-being for the boys at the start of their educational journey. This life course perspective reflects an awareness of how the experience of being celebrated as individuals, connected through play, and experiencing community and positive home school connections, facilitated a positive start for Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem.

**Child Well-Being Framework**

Using the positive indicator for child well-being framework as a guide, I explored the individual, relational, and contextual experiences of child well-being for four Black boys in Mrs. Sowell’s class. Specifically, highlighting the positive indicators of child well-being within the educational realm brought focus to how each boy felt about his relationship with Mrs. Sowell, his report of feeling cared for or supported by his teacher, and his reported feelings about school—or belonging (Lippman et al., 2011). Data used to assess these indicators were gathered through parent interviews, child interviews, in-class observations, and interactions with the boys.

The child well-being positive indicator framework was extended within this study to include specific individual considerations for race, age, and gender of the boys. This provided a
relevant example for applying this framework with diverse populations such as preschool-aged Black boys in an effort to understand the ways they flourish within this school context (Lippman et al., 2011). Although there is still a need to identify specific measurement tools of various positive indicators for use with the preschool population (Lippman et al., 2011), this research provides significant information regarding a subjective nature of well-being. This further reinforces the ability of young children to voice their unique experience of well-being practices within a specific developmental time (Fattore et al., 2012; Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015). More importantly, these findings are consistent with prior research on child well-being which underscored the need for indicators to be subjective, developmentally relevant, and contextually specific (Statham & Chase, 2010).

**Informing Methodology**

Findings from the current study confirm previous literature indicating young children are capable of sharing their thoughts and feelings regarding school relationships when developmentally appropriate research methods are utilized (Clark & Moss, 2001; Fattore et al., 2012; Katz et al., 2017). As the research community begins to recognize the voice of young children as a valuable source of data in educational research, increased efforts may be made towards improving developmentally appropriate and ethically sound processes for engaging young children. This research process has taught me that there is rich, valuable, subjective data to be garnered from the preschool stage of development, which may help us improve future learning opportunities for Black boys in preschool.

The unique analytic features of narrative inquiry research methodology permitted me as the researcher to live alongside and engage in authentic relationships with my participants. This process allowed for both personal and social interrogation and a truthful unveiling of the
educational system and me as a coconspirator within an often-oppressive system. Narrative inquiry design provided an opportunity to explore the tensions of time, action, context, certainty, and people in my analysis and not be afraid of wondering into those “in-between places” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 84) to embrace uncertainty in the process of discovery. Learning from tensions, pushed me to consider the ways society, schools, and institutions of learning can be repressive, particularly by those who have yet to be liberated from fears and ways of thinking and doing.

In research data has the ability to “speak” to us in compelling ways. The process by which it is generated is also critical and relevant. For me, there were distinctions which emerged in the data-gathering process of narrative inquiry which taught me to consider and cherish the complex nature of silence. With the boys, this silence was illustrated with limited words, long pauses, waiting for answers to formulate, or the silence of not knowing the language. There was also the gift of sitting with silence and discovering alternative ways of being and experiencing children and their interpretations of well-being from the perspective of a child rather than the voice of an adult. Existing simultaneously were the silent tensions of bias, repressive and limiting ideologies, restrictions, and fears that are rarely acknowledged or spoken. This process gave a voice to the boys in a powerful way and also allowed for new truthful discoveries of educational systems. Although data is important, the process through which it is gathered has the potential to be significant and transformational for both researcher and participants.

Implications

As I constructed the research puzzle, I acquiesced to first being changed, then shifted towards the possibilities for outward adjustments. Narrative inquiry methodology provided a unique opportunity to rediscover my personal and social justifications for engaging in this
research process. Considerations for this vital step informed how I considered and developed implications from my findings. The implications significant for policy makers, school administrators, teachers, preschool support staff, and families are discussed below.

**Policy Implications**

Research has the power to change how programs are implemented as well as influence decisions regarding the distribution of resources (Andrews, 2020). My research with Kyle, Hakeem, Nashawn, and Christopher was aimed at understanding their positive relational experiences with their teachers while they were still in preschool. I hoped to uncover the experiences they deemed to be engaging, fun, and enjoyable. I learned about the interactions with their teachers which mattered to each child. My intent was not to critique or praise any one practice, teacher, or way of interacting. Rather, my aim was to share the voices of the boys and attend to their unique experiences. The findings of this research provide a child-centered perspective on their experience of a state-funded program. Understanding the experience of Black boys provides policy makers keen insight for developing plans and policies to increase opportunities for advancing educational equity in preschools.

Prioritizing the subjective experiences of child well-being when making decisions may lead to increased retention and engagement of Black boys in preschool. This social justice lens also may create increased opportunities for the voices of children, particularly those who have been systematically marginalized within the educational context, to be heard as a significant and necessary part of the decision-making process and policy both in and out of preschool classrooms. Throughout the text, I have shared accounts of the challenges and inequalities Black boys experience in school. Creating opportunities for the voices of Black preschool boys to be
heard reminds us that educational spaces and educational research also have the power to uplift and reclaim opportunities for those who have been unseen and relegated to exist in the shadows.

**Administrative Role in Protecting Play for Black Preschool Boys**

Across all four narratives the importance of play with Mrs. Sowell and their peers was highlighted as a way Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem experienced child well-being practices from their teacher. Celebrating play in our preschool classrooms maintains and honors this childhood stage of development for Black boys. In addition, research has shown play to be a vehicle for advancing academic potential and viability both in and outside of the classroom (Bergen 2018). Despite data to support the importance of play and kinesthetic forms of learning and engagement (Early et al., 2010), there is a growing risk of eliminating play in early childhood settings and replacing it with more rigor and academics (Bergen, 2018). In addition, I have witnessed instances where play is withheld as a form of discipline or punishment for young preschool children. As they are often victims of disproportionate discipline practices (DOE Office of Civil Right, 2014), Black boys are particularly at risk for losing opportunities to play and consequently the benefits play provides (Bryan, 2020).

Educational leaders and administrators must do more to protect play as an instrumental part of the early learning curriculum for Black boys in state-funded preschool context. As Bryan (2020) explained, “Play is a language and literacy practice and must be part of the curriculum to support the boyhood and academic experiences of Black boys” (p. 22). This can be accomplished by ensuring that the classroom sizes and supplies are conducive for hands-on learning and required materials consistently and readily available. In addition, administrators can provide tangible supports by ensuring preschool programs have adequate playground facilities where children can run, jump, slide, and scream. In areas of the country where there are weather related
limitations for outdoor play, efforts should be made to identify indoor locations for children to safely engage in relevant gross motor activities for at least 20% of their preschool day (Early et al., 2010). Limits and restrictions on play and various kinds of play for Black preschool boys points to an often-unjust educational system attempting to rob Black boys of their childhoods (Bryan, 2020). Protecting and nurturing the play for Black boys in preschool and beyond requires elimination of practices which interrupt their involvement in play as is a method for ensuring their experience of child well-being.

**Teacher Preparation and Practice**

The focus on relationships throughout this study highlight key considerations for supporting child well-being for Black preschool boys. Specifically, the findings from this study suggest a need for teachers to increase skills linked to building relationships with boys and supporting their capacity to develop and sustain positive peer relationships. As Reichert and Hawley (2010) wrote, “Relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning is performed” (p. 191). An awareness of this knowledge suggests that before achievement and academic engagement can begin, important relational connections must be made (Reichert & Nelson, 2016). As findings from the current study demonstrate, Mrs. Sowell took time to get to know each boy as an individual, met their unique relational needs, and connected with each boy to advance his specific educational goals. Mrs. Sowell also conveyed care in ways specific and unique to each boy. As teachers prepare to service Black boys at the start of their educational trajectory, a focus centered on how to develop strong relationships must be infused in the practice and culture of educational institutions (Graham et al., 2016).

Teacher preparation programs must also create room for teachers of all races to explore their fears, misperceptions, and biases towards Black boys and men. If these biases are not
addressed, new educators may continue to fuel the preschool to prison pipeline (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). The culture and ways of Black boys who are achieving, thinking, imagining, and nurturing must not be pathologized in early childhood educational spaces. Requirements for preservice and current educators must include bias awareness training. Interventions aimed at reducing bias towards boys, Black children, and other marginalized groups must first begin with providing safe spaces and opportunities for educators to acknowledge, discover and explore their biases as they begin to make connections with young children and their families. Requirements to engage in ongoing professional development and increase their awareness of bias and how it may present in their relationships with Black preschool boys, reflect opportunities to keep data current through coaching, training, and ongoing support as a community of life-long learners.

Additional measures to improve relational experiences in preschool classrooms may also include consistent implementation of assessment tools such as the classroom assessment scoring system [CLASS] (Pianta et al., 2008). This tool provides teachers with objective data aimed at assessing the relationship climate in their classrooms. Having a relational focus may help facilitate an atmosphere where teachers are primarily focused on helping young children to feel safe, secure, and cared for in their preschool classroom.

**Support Staff and Intervention Services**

Support staff which includes PIRT coaches, teacher coaches, school social workers, and guidance counselors, must also advocate for social emotional learning curriculums which help children learn how to manage their emotions and build positive relationships with peers and adults. Evidenced-based programs such as the Second Step Curriculum (Beland, et al., 1997; Upshur et al., 2017) is a comprehensive program which provides teachers creative strategies for teaching social skills to young children in developmentally appropriate ways.
Intervention staff must also support with implement strategies which facilitate a balanced and contextual understanding of the Black preschool boys. This should also include working with teachers and administrators to ensure no preschool child is ever suspended, expelled, or pushed out from school. Such practices are derivatives of the inequity that exist in society and within the educational context (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Advocating for the social justice rights of Black preschool boys suggests intervention professionals work to increase opportunities for Black boys to access and sustain their enrollment in the state-funded preschools in order to reap the benefits of involvement in early childhood education. This requires support staff who are committed to helping teachers and families implement culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate, nurturing supports rather than referring Black preschool boys for special education services solely based on behavior. In addition, support staff may also work with teachers and families to build on strengths of young children. A shift in focus toward identifying boys and girls who are excelling in pre-academic skills in addition to screening for delays, may work in tandem to reducing the special education referral rates and enrich educational experiences of all learners.

**Family Action and Advocacy**

Families of Black preschool boys play a vital role in advocating for their child’s school experience. Fostering practices that increase congruence between home and school environments are important for a child’s early learning success (Dodge et al., 2010). To do this, families of preschool boys must remain informed about developmentally appropriate practices to engage and foster young children’s love and joy for learning (NAEYC, 2009).

Family presence in schools is crucial, accordingly consistent visits and participating in volunteer opportunities at school increase opportunities for families to become familiar with
routines and practices within their child’s preschool classroom. Similar to the findings revealed in this study, familial communication with teachers in schools facilitates a positive home-school connections and information exchange with teachers about the family’s cultural practices and traditions. This knowledge may facilitate and improve educational goal attainment for young children. In addition to communicating with teachers about their sons’ unique strengths and talents, families of Black preschool boys may also encourage teachers to incorporate books, music, and other media which reflect the racial and ethnic make-up of the children in the class and specifically illustrate Black boys and men in positive affirming roles. The presence of literature and books which depicts Black people, specifically Black males, in affirming roles is critical for the developing sense of identity and well-being of Black preschool boys (Wright & Counsell, 2018). The presence of such artifacts in the classroom works towards dismantling negative stereotypes and preconceived notions of inferiority for Black boys and men (Bryan, 2017).

Parent and family advocates must also work with families and teachers to bridge the gap for ongoing communication and engagement with families of Black preschool boys. Positive celebrations such as school trips and holiday festivals which are often highly attended by families, can serve as reciprocal learning opportunities for teachers to learn about family culture. These events may also be paired with opportunities to inform families about the curriculum ideas for supporting their young learners.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Each research study has limitations to the findings. In general, qualitative research methods do not provide generalizable findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, the racial or ethnic background of the teacher and data generation procedures provide important
considerations for exploring educational research with Black boys in preschool and point us towards possible modifications or adjustments for future research.

**Teacher’s Race and Ideology as Variables**

While not the focus of this study, research literature is consistently clear in acknowledging the significance of racial or ethnic match between the teacher and child. Findings have shown increased closeness (Wood et al., 2017), decreased ratings of negative behaviors (Graves & Howes, 2011), and increased empathy regarding a child’s background (Gilliam et al., 2016) when there is congruence between the race or ethnicity of the teacher and child. In this study both Mrs. Sowell and her assistant Mrs. Walters identified as African American or Black. However, most Black boys are taught by a teacher of a different race or ethnicity (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Research exploring the subjective experiences of child well-being practices from Black boys in preschool who are taught by teachers of different races or ethnicities should be explored in future studies. It may also be valuable to gather information regarding the racial ideology or beliefs of preschool teachers regardless of their race. This may prove relevant for their preschool experience of child well-being. Prior research with older Black boys revealed their teachers’ perceptions of Black male student ability, significantly influenced student performance in school (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn et al., 2011). Accordingly, more information regarding significant teacher variables should be explored for Black boys during the early learning years.

Additional research is also warranted to explore how the strength and complexities of the teacher-child relationship for Black preschool boys may also impact the child’s experience of positive peer relationships in preschool (Bryan, 2017; Mihaela, 2015). With new knowledge from the current research findings regarding the expressed relational experiences of child well-
being for Black preschool boys, further research is warranted to assess how teachers may respond to these expressed needs such as playful connections. Specifically, more research is warranted assess the relationship between a teacher’s efforts to attend to the expressed relational needs of Black preschool boys and how this may impact the strength of the relational connection as well as classroom discipline referral rates or requests for intervention.

**Data-Generation Procedures**

Spending time with the boys in their classroom provided rich and informative data. However, because this time was initially aimed at rapport building, I neglected to attend to important elements of the physical environment such as the kinds of books, posters, and music reflected in the classroom. These factors are consistently cited in the literature as important and relevant components for supporting the well-being of Black children (Bishop, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Wright & Counsell, 2018). Future research would involve reviewing and assessing how the artifacts and items in the physical environment such as toys, books, and pictures, reflect the culture of Black preschool boys and how these relate to their experience of child well-being.

During the process of conducting the interviews, many of my participants wanted to move around and actively engage with the environment. Given research findings regarding play and the importance of play in the lives of young children (Dodge et al., 2010; Early et al., 2010), it may be important to consider a play-based interview with boys. In addition, using picture prompts and visuals to generate conversations, activities may also be a useful method of facilitating engagement with young children (Clark & Moss, 2001; Chu, 2014; Katz et al., 2017). The use of video to record my interactions and conversations with each child and their play
during the interview may have also been a more practical way to attend to the various elements of time, place, and sociality (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

**Time**

Based on my experience in this research process, the limited timeline of 4 months made some aspects of getting to know the boys and their relational experiences with their teacher challenging. Having more time with the boys across the 10-month school year may have added to the richness and complexities of the narratives. More research exploring the experiences of Black boys in preschool is required. A replication of this study across an entire 10-month school year within a class where Black preschool boys are taught by a teacher of a different race or ethnicity, may be an important next step to increasing our knowledge about the experiences of well-being of Black boys in preschool. In addition, gathering additional longitudinal data, particularly related to transition patterns in kindergarten and the subjective relational experiences of each boy as he transitions across multiple teachers and contexts, may be an important consideration for future research. This is particularly relevant given research regarding the challenges Black boys have experienced during pivotal early transitions such as the transition to kindergarten (Iruka, Gardner-Neblett et al., 2014).

In addition to a longer duration, additional methodological approaches may also enhance future research findings. Pairing qualitative research with the use of quantitative research methods (mixed methods) to assess the quality of child-teacher relationships may be instrumental in measuring relationship quality in preschool classrooms. The CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008) is a tool that may be used to capture an objective assessment of classroom quality from the child’s perspective (Pelatti et al., 2016).
Final Thoughts

Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

—Chinua Achebe

Telling the Story

Throughout this work I have aimed to amplify their voice, reclaim childhoods, and celebrate the humanity of Black preschool boys through visual representation and sharing their words and experiences. As I reflect on Bryan, the young preschool boy I encountered many years ago, I am grateful for the privilege of sharing the perspectives and voices of four Black preschool boys enrolled in a state-funded program. I was honored by the time, patience, and care that Hakeem, Kyle, Christopher, Nashawn, their families, and teachers afforded me throughout this process. I hope these new discoveries of their experiences of child well-being and what is possible, will not only be seen as valuable tools for teachers, parents, administrators, and policy makers, but also a source of empowerment for the boys themselves.

Looking Ahead

As the data reflects, there are strong powerful systems of inequity which exist in education. For many Black children in the US, “Schooling is a site for suffering.” (Dumas, 2014, p. 2). Accountability is misappropriated when Black boys and men are maligned for the challenges they experience. Rather efforts must be aimed towards creating equitable experiences for all children within and across educational systems.

Contrastingly, the potential and promise of what can happen when Black boys encounter teachers like Ms. Sowell in preschool, help us better understand and appreciate the critical need for providing ongoing teacher development and a comprehensive approach to educating, caring
for, and connecting with Black boys at the very beginning of their educational journeys. As evidenced by the narratives of Christopher, Nashawn, Kyle, and Hakeem, these early deposits have robust and positive implications for their sense of belonging, school engagement, and positive relationships among teachers and peers alike.

In light of these new voices, it is critical for educators to recognize the promise and the possibilities of Black preschool boys at the start of their educational journeys. With this new developmental perspective, it is my hope Black boys will now be seen, heard, and experienced in more nurturing ways throughout their process of becoming. As they initiate their brave first steps, may those in the educational community work to challenge biases and cherish our roles as pavers at the beginning of a long educational journey. May these collective responses create opportunities for Black preschool to freely and bodly venture towards promising destinations.
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### Appendix A

Child Well-Being Positive Indicator Conceptual Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains/Constructs</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Sources for extant measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological/emotional development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall psychological, emotional well-being</td>
<td>Happiness, subjective well-being, flourishing, life satisfaction</td>
<td>HBSC, What Young People Think (WYPT, UNICEF opinion poll), EU-SILC, Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement (PSID-CDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>Age-appropriate autonomy, emotional self-regulation, persistence, constructive time use</td>
<td>Seligman 2002; PISA; TIMSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Placefulness, resourcefulness, positive role-taking, realistic goal setting, motivation</td>
<td>Matthews et al. 2006; Ryshen and Salganik 2001, 2003; Snyder 2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of purpose</td>
<td>Positive outlook and constructive adaptation to adverse events</td>
<td>Lerner et al. 2005, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>World Values Survey (WVS); Matthews et al. 2006; Smith and Denton 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social development &amp; behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral character</td>
<td>Ethical behavior, integrity</td>
<td>Lerner et al. 2005, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial values</td>
<td>Caring, empathy for others</td>
<td>Barber 2005; Lerner et al. 2005, 2008; Matthews et al. 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social intelligence</td>
<td>Communication, cooperation, conflict-resolution skills, trust, intimacy</td>
<td>PISA, National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural intelligence</td>
<td>Cross-cultural competence</td>
<td>Ryshen and Salganik 2001, 2003; ECEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental awareness and behavior</td>
<td>Knowledge, positive behaviors</td>
<td>ECEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic awareness, motivation</td>
<td>Age-appropriate concern and motivation regarding community, social or public issues, civic knowledge, civic self-image and self-efficacy, and connectedness</td>
<td>ICCS; Benson et al. 2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| RELATIONSHIPS                           |                                                                           |                                                                 |
| Family                                  |                                                                           |                                                                 |
| Positive relations with parents          | Warmth, closeness, communication, support, positive advice               | Haire et al. 2005; Matthews et al. 2006; HBSC, WYPT, EU-SILC     |
| Positive relations with siblings, extended family | Warmth, closeness, communication, support, positive advice               | Vellan and Ilboudo 2005; EU-SILC                                 |
| Positive functioning of family as a whole | Outings, celebrations, vacations, family meals together                 | NSCH; Guzman and Jekielek 2004; PISA 2000                         |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains/Constructs</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Sources for extant measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive friendships</td>
<td>Supportive friendships, quality of relationship with peers,</td>
<td>Matthews et al. 2006; Add Health; WYPT; EU-SILC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>opportunity to meet friends or invite friends home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive relations w/ teachers</td>
<td>Student report of teacher support</td>
<td>McNeely 2005; ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive engagement and connection</td>
<td>Participation in school clubs and extracurricular activities at school</td>
<td>ICCS; ECEP; HBSC; Add Health; Matthews et al. 2006; McNeely 2005; EU-SILC; ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of belonging at school and peer acceptance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive relations w/ nonfamily adults</td>
<td>Advice, support, communication</td>
<td>ECEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement in community institutions</td>
<td>Participates in organized recreation activities</td>
<td>NLSY, National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), WYPT, ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging in community</td>
<td>Participates in activities at community orgs/institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic engagement</td>
<td>Current or past participation w/ organizations such as human-rights groups, religious associations, or youth clubs</td>
<td>ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentions regarding future political and civic participation as adults (e.g. voting, campaigning, volunteer work)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive and nontaxing employment</td>
<td>Hours worked</td>
<td>International Labor Organization statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive digital/electronic relationships</td>
<td>Hours spent and content of media interactions</td>
<td>Lenhart and Madden 2007; Lenhart et al. 2007; MacGill 2007; Roberts and Fosher 2008; Roberts et al. 2005; ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Macrosystems</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive group identity</td>
<td>Relates positively to own group membership without disparaging others</td>
<td>Umaña-Taylor 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engages w/ positive ideologies, movements</td>
<td>Cultural, spiritual, political, economic</td>
<td>ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive parenting</td>
<td>Warmth, communication, role modeling, time/discussion w/ children, appropriate structure/monitoring, high expectations</td>
<td>NLSY, ADD Health, PISA, ICCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental activities and enrichment</td>
<td>Read books to child, go to the library, go on outings</td>
<td>PIRLS, PISA, TIMSS, National Household Education Survey (NHES)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1  (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains/Constructs</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Sources for extant measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement in community</td>
<td>School, religious institution, community organizations</td>
<td>HBSC, NHIES, WVS, EVS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Steady parental employment and adequate income/benefits, adequate housing, child care, parent education, number of adults in household, health services, cognitive/developmental resources (books, phone, internet, magazines, newspapers)</td>
<td>EU-SILC, TIMMS, PISA, PIRLS, WVS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Quantity and quality of social, family and business networks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe household</td>
<td>Absence of smoke, in good repair, no lead, etc.</td>
<td>American Housing Survey (AHS), EU-SILC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Peers who do not engage in risky behavior and who are good students</td>
<td>Education Longitudinal Study; Matthews et al. 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Recreation facilities and spaces</td>
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<td>Appropriate structure, high expectations</td>
<td>ECEP</td>
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<td>Societal values, lifestyles, spending patterns</td>
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<td>WVS, EVS</td>
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Names of sources (last column) are written out on first reference and abbreviated thereafter

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Flyer

His Beginning Matters!

PARENTS: YOUR CHILD’S OPINION MATTERS. LET HIS VOICE BE HEARD.
Participate in a study and let us know how we can make Pre-K better for your son.

Eligibility & Participation

• Your son must be 4 years old by October 1, 2018.
• Be enrolled in a preschool program in a Newark District School.
• This study requires a 20-30 minute child interview during one session, at your son’s school.
• Your son will participate in a play-based interview about his preschool experience with his teacher.
• An additional 15 minute parent interview at your son’s school may also be required - if needed.
• Parents or legal guardians will receive a $15 ShopRite or Amazon gift card upon completion.

This study is being conducted by Keisha Wint, LCSW. She is a PRTI (Preschool Intervention & Referral Team) Specialist with the Office of Early Childhood for Newark Public Schools and supports teachers in their interactions with young learners. She is also Doctoral Student in the Family Science & Human Development Department. If you are interested in participating or have more questions, please contact her at (718)850-1653 or wintk1@montclair.edu

This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, MSU IRB #FY17-18-1098
Appendix C

Parent Consent Letter

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Title: The Beginning: Exploring Educational Experiences for Black Boys in State-funded Urban Preschools.

Study Number: FYI-15-199

Who is this study about? The purpose and aim of this study is to explore factors that support the positive development and well-being of the preschooler of Black boys. The study is funded by the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP).

What will happen while your child or dependent is in the study?
- Your child will be asked 10-15 questions by the researcher in his school, in his class, using a survey.
- Your child will be asked questions to interact with his teacher. (Example: Does your teacher do anything that makes you happy?)
- After your child’s interview, you may be asked to help clarify his answers. Your interview will take place in person at the school.
- Both your child’s answers and yours will be captured via audio recording.

Time: This study will take about 20-30 minutes over one semester. If needed, we may also need an extra 15 minutes of your time to clarify some of your son’s answers.

Risks: Your child or dependent may feel shy or uncomfortable in taking with the researcher. We ask that you be present during the interview to support the process.

Benefits: There are no explicit benefits to you or your son from his participation in the study. Preschool education and policy makers will benefit from the study by better understanding the positive aspects of preschool that matter most to young Black boys.

Compensation: To compensate you for the time you and your child or dependent spend in this study, you will receive a $125 Amazon or Amazon gift card. You will be eligible for compensation after completion of the 15-minute interview.

Who will know that your child or dependent is in this study? Your child or dependent will not be linked to any presentation. We will keep who you and your son are confidential.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable belief to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or any act of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP).

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Please call Krista Wint at 973-655-3205 or email winkt@montclair.edu. Faculty Sponsor is Dr. Pauline Garcia-Valles. She can be contacted via phone at 973-655-3466 or email at pgeorgiadis@gmail.com.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Please call Dr. Krista Wint at 973-655-3205 or email winkt@montclair.edu.

Future Studies: It’s okay to use the data in other studies:
- Parent initial: Yes __ __ No __

As part of this study, it is okay to videotape my child or dependent:
- Parent initial: Yes __ __ No __

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent
I have read this form and decided that I agree to my child’s participation in the project described above. Its general purpose, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that my child can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form. If you choose to have your child or dependent in this study, please fill in the lines below.

Child’s Name: __________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________

Name of Parent/Guardian: __________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________

Name of Principal Investigator: __________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________
Appendix D

Child Assent PowerPoint

Our Project

Hi! My name is Ms. Keishi.

I work with boys and girls in schools like yours. I want to learn what you like about school and your teacher.

If you get tired, you can take a break whenever you want.

You can go step whenever you want. Just ask us!

If you decide to be in my project, we will play some talking games.

You can tell me about your class and your teacher.

I hope you will have fun playing and talking with me.

You are helping me with my work.

Sometimes I will use my computer to record our voices and I remember all your words.

Do you want to be part of our project?

YES  NO
Appendix E
Child Interview Questions

(Questions will follow after assent is given via review of PowerPoint on a tablet)

My name is Ms. Keisha and I came to talk with you about your class and your teachers. I have some pictures to show you as we talk. Is it OK if I ask you some questions?

Question 1: Here I have a picture of your classroom (show picture). Please tell me about your classroom. (Probe) Where do you like to play? What do you do here?

Question 2: Tell me about your teachers? What are their names? What does (insert teachers’ name) do in the classroom? Say the teacher and teacher assistant’s names separately.

Question 3: What are some things you do in class with your teacher- (insert teachers’) name? Say the teacher and teacher assistant’s names separately.

Question 4: What are some fun things you like to do with (insert teacher’s name) in class? Say the teacher and teacher assistant’s names separately.

Question 5: Does your teacher do anything that makes you laugh? What are some things that your teacher does in class that makes you laugh?

Question 6: Are there things you like about your class? What are some things that you like about your class?

Question 7: Are there things that you like about your teacher? What do you like about your teacher (s)? Say the teacher and teacher assistant’s names separately

Question 8: Does your teacher do anything that makes you happy? What are some things your teacher does to make you feel happy?

Question 9: Does your teacher do things that make you feel special? What does your teacher do to make you feel special?

Question 10: Does your teacher care about you? How do you know?

Question 11: Who helps you in class if you need help?

Question 12: Do you feel safe in your class? What makes you feel safe?

Question 13: Is there anything else you want to tell me about (insert teacher’s name) teachers? Say the teacher and teacher assistant’s names separately.
Question 14: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your class?
Appendix F

Parent/Family Interview Questions

(To be asked after the child’s interview is completed)

Question 1: Does your son _________________ like his teacher?

Question 2: Why do you believe your son ___________ likes his teacher?

Question 2: What do you think your son _____________ likes best about his teacher?
Appendix G

Letter to Parents

Dear Parent,

Thank you for allowing your son to participate in my research study for my doctoral dissertation. As previously mentioned, the purpose and aim of this study is to understand the ways that preschool age Black boys experience child well-being practices from their preschool teachers. In addition to conducting the after-school interviews during the months of February to June of 2019, I also spent time in the classroom and had informal conversations with all the children and their teachers.

I would like your permission to include some of these conversations as part of my research. These anecdotes provided valuable insight into your son’s perspective. Your son’s anonymity as well as the anonymity of other children and the school will be maintained and confidentiality will be safeguarded.

Please sign the additional consent form to allow your son’s informal classroom conversations to be included as part of my research.

All of my research request methods have been approved by Montclair State University and Newark Board of Education and your participation is voluntary.

If you have any question or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 973-868-1503.

Sincerely,

Keisha M. Wint, LCSW
PhD Candidate
Department of Family Science and Human Development at Montclair State University
Statement of Additional Consent

I have read this form and decided that I agree to my child’s participation in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that my child can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form. If you choose to have your child or dependent in this study, please fill in the lines below.

Child’s Name: _________________________________________________________________

Name of Parent/Guardian | Signature | Date
--- | --- | ---
Name of Parent/Guardian | Signature | Date
Name of Principal Investigator | Signature | Date
Appendix H

Adult Consent Form

ADULT CONSENT FORM

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

**Title:** The Beginning: Exploring Educational Experiences for Black Boys in State-funded Preschool Programs

**Study Number:** FY17-18-1098

**Why is this study being done?** The purpose and aim of this study is to explore factors that support the positive development and well-being from the perspective of the child and give a voice to preschool-age Black boys who attend state-funded, urban preschool programs.

**What will happen while you are in the study?** Field notes from informal conversation and observations of classroom visits conducted by Keisha M. Wint during the February to June of 2019 will be included in her research study.

**Risks:** There are no known risk as you will review your quoted statements prior to its inclusion ensure they adequately represents your statements.

**Benefits:** There are no explicit benefits to you from participation in the study. Preschool educators and policy makers will benefit from the study by better understanding the positive aspects of preschool that matter most to young, Black, preschool boys.

**Who will know that you are in this study?** You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are anonymous.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency.
Do you have to be in the study? 
You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be included in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Do you have any questions about this study? Please call Keisha Wint at 973-868-1503 or email wintkl@montclair.edu. Faculty Sponsor is Dr. Pauline Garcia-Reid she may be contacted via phone at 973-655-8646 or by email at garciareidp@mail.montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@montclair.edu.

Future Studies It is okay to use my data in other studies:
Please initial: ____________ Yes  ______ No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Print your name here  Sign your name here  Date

Name of Principal Investigator  Signature  Date
PERMISSION

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Signature: ____________________________
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Title: Student
Company: Montclair State University
Address: 110 Orchard Road
Maplewood, NJ 07040
Phone: 973-868-1503 / Email: Wintkl@montclair.edu
Date: 4/22/2020

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