Letters to Our Teachers
Black and Latino Males Write About Race in the Classroom
Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz and Chance W. Lewis

Teachers, I realize that there is a pink elephant in almost every educational setting that we refuse to acknowledge. . . . and that is race. That word seems to bring out virulent feelings in people.

—Gerald, twelfth grade

As a form of communication, letter writing provides a way for the writer to put onto the page what may not be possible to verbalize to the intended in person. It should be no surprise, then, that a letter can be an effective tool for students who are marginalized in schools to have their voices heard.

The authors of this chapter are all too familiar with a segment of our school population whose voices are routinely silenced in our classrooms—Black and Latino males. Our many years of teaching in K–12 settings, and our current work in schools that serve Black and Latino boys, prompted us to create an assignment intended to help amplify the voices of some of our high school Black and Latino male students. We asked ten of them to use the pen to tell their teachers, past and present, how they feel about the ways race has positively or negatively affected their classroom learning experiences. They were asked to muse about one teacher or a collective of teachers who had taught them in high school. We instructed them to speak from the heart, and what the letters of these young men made clear was the following: (a) a desire to be respected, (b) a belief that teachers should have high expectations for them, and (c) the need to have conversations about the way race affects their lives in and out of school.

The purpose of this chapter is to share the perspectives of this group as a way to learn what troubles Black and Latino male high school students most about race in the classroom. The voices of the ten letter writers can help teachers understand why it is important to talk about the notion of race, particularly with students of color within this gender and age group. Furthermore, it can offer an instructional practice that can solicit generative conversations around race in the classroom.

Letter Writing to Communicate a Purpose

When we think of letters that changed our society, we may immediately think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Nearly fifty years ago, on Good Friday in 1963, Dr. King and a group of Blacks marched into downtown Birmingham to protest segregation laws and were arrested. Eight White clergymen in Birmingham wrote a letter asking the Blacks in the town to cease demonstrations. Their letter appeared in the town’s main newspaper. In response, King wrote a letter from his Birmingham cell—a letter that marked a turning point in the American Civil Rights Movement. His purpose for writing his letter was clear:

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view that argues against “outsiders coming in.” I
have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our Affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. . . . Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

In his letter, Dr. King is speaking to a particular audience (eight White clergymen) about a specific problem (racial inequality) and calling for a clear answer (an equal society). The authenticity and directness in which his letter is written reveals a clear sense of purpose and a desire to connect with his audience around a solution to the racial divide that exists (then and now) in America. There is an urgency in Dr. King’s letter, an expression that if the audience of his letter doesn’t move toward creating positive changes for the Blacks oppressed under Jim Crow laws in Birmingham, there would be further protests and negative outcomes for both the writer (and who he represents) and the audience (the White clergy and White America).

We find this same sense of urgency in the letters of the ten youth who share their missives here. Like King, these young men have a clear sense of purpose and a specific call to action for their audience. The themes that were consistent in the letters included (a) teachers’ low expectations, (b) feelings of both invisibility and hypervisibility, (c) disappointment with the way teachers were not living up to their teaching responsibility, and (d) feeling misunderstood. We understand that reading the findings of this study may prove to be upsetting to teachers, particularly those who work hard with all of their students, including their Black and Latino males. However, the question teachers should ask themselves as they read, no matter how difficult it is to do so, is whether they might be culpable or how they might make a difference in changing their students’ realities.

Letter Writing as a Means of Validating One’s Perspective

In 1963 when James Baldwin published his address, “A Talk to Teachers,” in the Saturday Review after delivering it as a speech in New York City, America’s race relations were in a fragile state. As an active member of the Civil Rights Movement, but not a teacher himself, Baldwin expressed an urgency for teachers of the Negro child to “go for broke.” “A Talk to Teachers,” which reads as a letter to educators, conveys a warning, as did A Letter from Birmingham Jail, and forebodes the consequences of continued inequality in America:

Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. . . . To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 325)

In her article “Goin’ for Broke: Reaping the Rewards of Teaching Toward Cultural and Linguistic Diversity,” Haddix (2010) expounds on Baldwin’s cry for teachers to “go for broke.” As she reflects on her own “talk to teachers,” she writes, “My task like Baldwin’s is to impress upon today’s audience of new and practicing teachers that there is a lot at stake. For too many education is a matter of life or death” (p. 84).

The youth* who responded to this assignment were given the directive, “What would you say if you had the opportunity to speak from your heart to your teachers about issues of race in school? Please start your letter with Dear Teacher(s):” Although this assignment was given in a class of eleventh and twelfth graders where students were accustomed to discussing controversial topics, the explicit opportunity to write a letter to a teacher about the contentious topic of race was a first for all of them. As part of their racial literacy development (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011), the students were given one class period to write a letter “from the heart”—revealing the first feelings that

*All student names are pseudonyms.
come to mind—to a specific teacher or a group of teachers they’ve had during their years in high school. This assignment was treated as a brainstorming—free writing assignment. Students were given ten minutes to jot down words and phrases to use in their letters. Then they used the remaining class period (thirty minutes) to write their letters. The students were not given the usual opportunity to work on multiple drafts of their work; however, students are now deciding whether to continue working on their letters and “go public” by sharing them with other teachers in their school as a way to make their perspectives clear and their desires known. Writing letters can be a most effective way to share one’s perspective and be explicit about what the writer expects from the reader.

This letter writing project occurred during the first week of a new school semester. It was the first assignment given to a group of young men, most of whom had taken a customized English class with the first author. The ten students who contributed letters to this project were students at an alternative high school on the East Coast. The students, all of whom self-identify as black or Latino, are members of UMOJA, an all-male, in-school mentoring program designed to develop students’ academic and social skills. Sunset Hills Academy-East (SHAE)† is one of four public schools in a consortium that serves undercounseled and underaged, mostly black and Latino students. The first author has taught the young men in this mentoring program for three years. The course, UMOJA Readers and Writers (URW), seeks to encourage and center the voices and perspectives of these students who are usually silenced in their other classes and in society at large. In this class, students were presented with a culturally responsive pedagogy meant to inspire their critique of society and their schooling experiences.

The letters are not directed solely at the teachers at SHAE. Because SHAE is a transfer school that serves older high school students, many of the students, including the young men in the URW class, have attended one or more high schools before arriving at SHAE. Some of the letters reflected learning experiences in other educational settings.

**Framing the Letters Project**

Examining the experiences of African-American PhD students at a predominantly White institution provided keen insight for the authors’ understanding of the themes that emerged from the letters. In their article “The Experiences of African American Ph.D. Students at a Predominately White Carnegie I-Research Institution,” Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, and Smith (2004) present data from their study that illuminates the four themes present in the analysis of these letters: (a) teachers’ low expectations of Black students, (b) feeling of invisibility and hypervisibility, (c) disappointment at the teachers for not fulfilling their duties, and (d) feeling misunderstood. Each theme is discussed in this chapter.

**Teachers’ Low Expectations of Black Students**

Similar to the students in the Lewis et al. study (2004), and a common sentiment expressed by male students of color in schools, the students who wrote letters to their teachers expressed frustration about the low expectations their teachers had for them. Understanding these low expectations to be directly tied to race, the Black students shared in classroom discussions and in their letters a belief that teachers did not expect much from them because they are Black. The youth harbored painful feelings and wrote in their letters about negative stereotypes teachers believe about Black students not being as smart as other students. In a letter to his former teachers, Terrell admonished them for not providing challenging work to help prepare him for the rigors of upper high school: “Can we talk about the work you asked us to do? It was baby work; stuff we did in seventh and eighth grade! Don’t be asking us to do no baby work!” In his letter, Terrell continued to challenge those teachers about their expectations of higher education for him and students like him: “I bet you don’t even know that most of us want to go to college and have our own dreams. Do you even care? I would like to really know why y’all don’t really expect nothing for us in life?” Gerald, another senior at SHAE, was more didactic in his letter to his teachers. He wrote,

> I need you to understand that you having low expectations of me would never propel me to greatness, because no one rises to low expectations. Remember feeling sorry for us, will never allow us to grow. Meet us where we are as scholars and stop stereotyping, which continues to stagnate and contamine.

Jamal challenged his teachers for believing that Black students were not capable of facilitating their own learning. He wrote, “We are learning that you don’t think we can have a discussion about our work without you and that

†Pseudonym.
just ain’t true. I just get tired of having to fight to be seen as a good student
and not a problem you have to fix.” Brady, an eleventh grade student, was
much more retrospective in his critique of his teachers. As a student who
had always received high honors in school, he expressed disappointment and
hurt and reminded his teachers, “From the time I began my educational
career, I have constantly had to prove myself; ... and at this I excelled,
which was repeatedly confirmed by my teachers telling me that I was ‘different’;
that I wasn’t like ‘the others.’” A doctoral student in the Lewis et al.
study (2004) expressed similar feelings about constantly needing to prove
herself to her White professors. She said, “You’re kind of on your guard
because as a Black person I felt like I had to do extra, better than everybody
else because I didn’t want anybody to say—well, she’s Black and came from
the ghetto” (p. 236). The ten writers in this study had educational experi-
ences in their various high schools, including SHAES, that gave them reason
to feel disappointed in their teachers and schools. In his letter, Elvin, a
twelfth grade student, wrote,

I am writing this letter from the heart. It is something that is both hard
and good to write. I’ve tried to forget a lot about what made me mad
about school. I’ve tried to forget a lot about what made me feel less than
the other white students in my class. And now that I look back, and just
see myself sitting in the back of the room, and remembering why you
never called on me. You didn’t believe I had the answers. You didn’t believe
that a Black kid like me could know the answers about that book in
English class or that math equation. You missed so much for not believing
in me. I missed so much for not believing in myself.

Alfredo, a Black and Latino eleventh grader, wrote,

There’s no way you think I can do the work. And because you don’t think
I am capable, I really believe that you don’t like me. See, the problem with
you is that you have favorites, and I ain’t one of them. Believe me, every-
time I step inside your classroom, I feel it. I know you don’t really want
me there. Your Spanish class—and it’s so ironic because I’m Spanish and
it is a topic I really like—is one that makes me count down the days to
graduation.

Kareem, an eleventh grader, wrote to his tenth grade math teacher,

What’s the best way to say it? I’ll just spell it: D-I-S-A-P-P-O-I-N-T-E-D!
That’s how I feel. I moved with my aunt so I could supposedly go to a

“better” school. Yeah, I may have learned a little bit more in that school,
but the way I was treated set me back even more, because I ended up
dropping out of the school because of the way I was treated there. It wasn’t
even hidden that you didn’t like your Black students, especially the boys.
Nobody called you on the things you would say, the way you treated us
just became the normal order of business.

Feelings of Invisibility and Hypervisibility

In the first line of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 epic novel Invisible Man, the narrator
bemoans his status as a Black man in America: “I am an invisible man
simply because people refuse to see me.” In her book Invisibility Blues (1990),
Michele Wallace, noted artist, activist, and Black feminist called for change
of the Black person’s experience in America. She discussed the 1987 New
York City Marathon as a case in point. That year marked the first time a
Black person (a Kenyan) won the New York City Marathon, considered to
be one of the most prestigious marathons in the world; if not the most
prestigious, it is certainly the most well known. Wallace observed how the
White male commentators of the televised event focused on the prospects of
a win for the two White male runners who were far behind the Kenyan, and
practically ignored his inevitable victory even when he was less than a mile
away from the finish line. Just as one of the cameras was going to show the
Kenyan’s clear and present victory, it cut away and brought into focus the
two White males. The Kenyan was never shown crossing the finish line and
triumphant breaking through the tape. Wallace noticed that even several
moments after the end of the race, the victor was not shown or even dis-
cussed on this particular television broadcast. In direct rebuttal, a group of
prominent New York City Black activists and academics held a special
celebration for the victor a few days later in Harlem. This invisibility in
the case of the Kenyan runner, Wallace argued, happens daily to Blacks in
America.

The Black and Latino students in the URW class expressed anger, frustra-
tion, and confusion at the paradoxical situation of invisibility that they
find themselves in: The teachers treat them differently from White students,
yet refuse to acknowledge or discuss race in the classroom. Their identity is
therefore ignored and they are made to feel invisible, while at the same time,
they are made very aware of their difference as students of color by the ways
in which their teachers treat them. Roberto, who identifies as Puerto Rican,
went to former teachers who he felt discriminated against Black and Latino
students in his classes. He wrote, "When you mention racism, it's like saying the word bomb. You all act like you never heard of it or it's a curse, but yet [the punishment depends] on the color of the kid's skin..." Gerald directly addressed being made to feel invisible by some of his teachers. Referencing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous quote about judging people by the content of their character and not the color of their skin, he wrote, "If we all took heed to this then many of my brothers would not be invisible. They would be regarded so that they perhaps would not have to go to extreme lengths to be noticed." Gerald asked his current teachers to "see" him and offer help when needed. "I need you to not ignore me because of my short comings that may bring a level of embarrassment to you while I am under your tutelage while in your classroom." In a lengthy two-page letter, Derrick, an eleventh grader, wrote,

Do you even see me unless you hear me? And all you teachers wonder why we talk loud. It's our way of being seen in a place where everyone wants to ignore us until it's time to find someone to blame for something. Then it's like magic, all the black and brown boys appear. Then the school is quick to call police officers into the school. When I was kid, they used to say the police officer is your friend—really?, not in my neighborhood. And they used to say your teacher wants what's best for you—really?, not in my school. By the way, I'm going to be a journalist. I remember how you thought I used somebody else's work, and had to prove over and over that I didn't. Well, maybe you learned that some of us are smarter than you think.

In his very brief letter, which read more like a poem, Jeremiah shared, "It's like you looked right through me / seen but unseen / known yet unknown / there but invisible / Why? Why be afraid to look me in the eyes? Are you afraid you'll see your disgust for me staring back at you?" A participant in the Lewis et al. (2004) study speaks specifically to this feeling of invisibility. A PhD student reported, "There were some faculty that initially I had the impression that they didn't even see me in the hall. I felt like I was totally invisible" (p. 235). These students, just like Gerald and the other URW students, yearned for their instructors to notice them and to "validate" them. Data from the Lewis et al. (2004) study report that several students expressed feelings of isolation on campus, and these feelings were often described as being invisible (p. 234). During a class discussion, and in his letter, Terrell commented on how he felt his aspirations and those of his peers were not acknowledged by their teachers, thus rendering them invisible when it came to identifying ambitious students. He wrote,

Do you ever think that maybe we want the same things as the white kids in school? As your own kids? We want good education. We want good jobs. We want nice families to come home to. Why can't you see that? What makes it so difficult for you to see those of us who are really working hard and trying hard to make it? When you don't see this, Miss, it's discouraging and we end up dropping out. You are our teachers, if you don't care, then why should we care? I'm gonna graduate and when I do, I ain't never coming back here. I feel sorry for the younger kids in this school cause y'all don't really expect nothing for us in life and they gonna find out like me and my friends did after all the bs you gonna put 'em through. This school is like prison, the principal be walking around with security like she need a bodyguard. Y'all all scared of us and racist—same s---, new day! I can't wait to get out of here.

In contrast to the feelings of invisibility that Roberto and Gerald shared, some of the young men commented on feeling hypervisible (Collins, 2008) when it came to some of their teachers. Derrick asked one of his current teachers, "Why is it that when I walk in late you have to call me out and when they [White students] walk in late you don't say nothing?" And Terrell signaled a similar singling out of Black students in one of his classes at SHAE: "I noticed that it's the same group of us who get in trouble in your class. We even talk about it with each other. We be wondering like 'damn, does Mister think we a gang or something? It's like we guilty on sight.'" And Jeremiah wrote in his letter poem to his former and current teachers, "Teachers may feel bad for a student / just for his skin color. Teachers look at 'minority students' differently / Why? that shouldn't be." Devon, like Terrell, wrote about feeling "seen" only when trouble broke out at his high school. In his letter he recalled an incident that made him feel like he and the other Black boys in his high school were being unfairly targeted:

The only time in my life I ever felt sorry about being Black was when something went down at school. I remember that day when someone started a fire in the boys bathroom, the principal went around to some of the classes, mostly the special ed classes where we were and started pulling out the Black guys one by one. It was like we were on trial. On trial for a crime we didn't even commit. But it was always like that. Whenever something was stolen, or the exit alarm went off, it was a Black kid who had to do it.
Based on this theme, we see the prevailing notion from Black and Latino youth that their invisibility in the classroom is real. By invisibility, we simply mean that in most situations teachers do not see this group for their true academic potential. As a result, lessons are “watered down” to meet their perceived academic levels. However, the letters tell us that these males of color want more academic challenges from their teachers. Even more dismaying, the letters reveal that teachers only see this population as the population who has the greatest likelihood of “acting out” in class. In summary, Black and Latino males are invisible when it comes to academic achievement but are hypervisible when related to classroom and school management issues. Teachers will have to reverse this trend if these males of color are to be successful.

Disappointment With Teachers for Not Fulfilling Their Duties

Clem (1986) noted, “Great teachers light the candles of greatness that will cause students to dig deep to fulfill their potential. It is the duty of the teacher to find that greatness” (p. 87). Although the students express feelings of anger and disappointment with their teachers, it is important to note that they want to have positive academic experiences and good relationships with their teachers. Their disappointment connects to the unmet expectations of their teachers. They hold teachers accountable for failing to provide them with a rigorous and quality education in classroom environments that are conducive to learning more about themselves and the society that they must navigate as young Black and Latino men. Even a student like Terrell, who was very critical in his letter about his teachers and educational experiences, was able to describe positive classroom experiences. Terrell talked about one teacher in particular who had a positive influence on his learning. He wrote, “So far I have only had one teacher in the past four years listen to me, care about me, about us. . . . I gave her much respect because that’s what she gave me. She was young and didn’t have the burnout that most of y’all older teachers have in this school.” Gerald implores his teachers, “I need you to show your greatness because that will give me some reason to show mine.” He went further to remind his teachers of his and other Black males’ precarious existence as young males of color in America: “Remember I am in a country where no one protects me because of the color of my skin. So I have always looked to you to cover me while I am on this journey.”

Brady and Jamal were very critical of those teachers who did not embrace their full responsibility and maintain high expectations of them in the classroom. Brady wrote, “Considering my experiences with regard to race and racism, I would like to express my disappointment with the way that many of my peers and I were treated. And not one of you stepped up and said anything. In my mind, this made you all complicit. Complicit in the injustice perpetrated against a child.” Jamal wrote, “A lot of you let me down. You had more power than I do, and were not willing to make a difference in my education.” As with the PhD students, Lewis et al. (2004) reported, “Student’s [sic] perceptions of faculty-student relationships were the strongest predictors of progress in doctoral programs for minority students” (p. 233). The doctoral students in the study felt they had only themselves to rely on if they were going to be academically successful; however, if they were able to receive support early on from a faculty member, not necessarily a Black professor, they were more likely to experience academic success. And even when these young writers achieved academic success, the experiences were tarnished and charged with racism. For example, Elvin, now an eleventh grade student, wrote about being selected as the salutatorian of his ninth grade class. In a letter that he described as “hard and good to write,” he wrote a letter to his ninth grade Catholic junior high school teachers:

When I stated in my graduation speech that America’s worst nightmare is someone young, Black, and intelligent, you’ll remember that I explained that statement by saying that was how I felt based on my years at your school. Little did I know that after accomplishing all of this, after playing by “the rules,” after making it to the top of my graduating class, it would be a problem. I was supposed to be the school’s first Black valedictorian, something for which my parents and I were proud. Especially because it was not an easy road. I had to work twice as hard to receive high marks, marks which seemed to be easily given to the White kids in my classes. When I got my high grades, I had to always check that they were being recorded in the grade books. All of this, and I had to endure the racist rants of certain teachers (we were called “monkeys” by one and told by another that we wouldn’t amount to anything). The NAACP was even called to come out to our school! Now tell me, does this sound like an environment that was conducive to learning? In spite of this all, I made it to the top of the class. However, through some “discrepancy with the grades,” I ended up sharing the number two spot. And not one of you stepped up and said anything. In my mind, this made you all guilty. Guilty in an injustice perpetrated against a child.
This theme reminds us of the power teachers can ultimately have on the trajectory of students' academic achievement in the K–12 setting. Too often teachers do not stand up for their males of color. For example, the teacher has the "power" to step in and prevent a disciplinary action taken by the school, or making sure a student rightfully receives an honor that he has worked hard to achieve. We see the prevailing theme throughout the letters that illustrate how disappointed these males of color were because they know teachers had the power to make a difference but did not speak up on their behalf.

Feeling Misunderstood

The lack of culturally responsive practices by their teachers left URW students feeling frustrated and irritated that their teachers did not view them in the context of their cultural backgrounds, further exacerbating feelings of invisibility. They criticized teachers for not taking the time to get to know them and understand why some students act and react as they do in certain situations. For example, Kareem spoke to the pressures that young Black and Latino males face from street culture (Lewis & Erskine, 2008), which sometimes carries over into their school lives. He told his teacher, "Well it's like that because we are from this so call[ed] hood where everyone wants to be a thug. Some kids that didn't grow up with parents, so they use that anger towards gangs, drugs, and guns." An important point to make about Kareem's comment was his mention of some, and not all Black and Latino kids. Brady continued this theme in his letter, "In addition to the pressure of achieving academic success, there was the added burden of having to represent the entire Black race in a positive light." Devon wrote, "It really did hurt to be seen as all the same, that no matter what you did that was positive, it couldn't overcome the negative labels teachers had for you. Once you were labeled, that label stuck with you all long as you were in that school."

These youth encouraged their teachers to understand that institutionalized racism complicated their daily existence. Brady felt that using classroom discussions to help deconstruct and destroy stereotypes about Black and Latino males was something that should be tackled by his teachers. He told them, "If only you noticed that I worked hard, and made working hard seem more normal than failure. But you couldn't see it because of your racist attitude against me. Everybody holds some kind of prejudice, it would have been important to be able to talk about these kinds of things in class." Alfredo spoke more explicitly about why Black and Latino male students may find themselves in situations: a possible attempt to "balance out" the inequity that comes with being a person of color in this country. He told his teachers, "Whites are born on the middle of the ladder [and] Blacks are born on the bottom with three missing bars ahead." Devon echoed Alfredo's observation in his letter: "Growing up in the projects I saw too much for my age. All type of bad things. Where I'm from all the bad things was cool so I followed." And finally, Terrell spoke clearly to his teachers about the stereotypes they held about him in particular, and other males of color in general, which led to their stereotyping and misunderstanding of who they are and what they manage as males of color. He wrote, "You don't know anything about me! You judge me because of my clothes and my swag—teachers can be haters, too." The PhD students in the Lewis et al. study (2004) also experienced feelings of being misunderstood. Lewis et al. (2004) noted, "But more important, there was a common belief that the faculty and university did not understand them or their needs" (p. 235). The students wished for teachers who had a better understanding of some of the challenges students of color face to get to college and remain successful PhD students. Instead, they felt there was an overwhelming insensitivity to their differences and needs as doctoral students.

Concluding Thoughts

Several key conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, there was a powerful notion from Black and Latino males who participated in the letter writing assignment that they were very disappointed with their teachers for not pushing them "academically" and for viewing them as deficient in the classroom settings. In many cases, these males of color reported that their teachers would hold them to very low expectations and would use various stereotypes to impede their growth. As Terrell noted, "I bet you don't even know that most of us want to go to college and have our own dreams. Do you even care?" This highlights that these young men wish that their teachers would have higher expectations of them.

Second, the feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility were common across all of the letters from the Black and Latino males in this study. This theme made clear that Black and Latino males had to put forth extra effort—sometimes in negative ways—just to get noticed in the classroom. These
letters highlight the notion that these students wanted to be noticed and validated in positive ways when it comes to academics. Additionally, they also desired equal treatment in the classroom when it came to management issues that arise. These students felt they were given stricter penalties when compared with their White counterparts. In many cases, these young men felt that their teachers would let White students “get away with” actions in the classroom for which they, the Black students, would have to face disciplinary action if they committed the same type of offense. Overall, Black and Latino males in this study were very disappointed with their teachers for not fulfilling their duties as it related to them having a positive educational experience. This included a common theme in the letters that teachers did not use the power they had to stand up for them in the face of injustice, even though they witnessed injustices being perpetrated against their Black and Latino male students every day within the walls of their schools. As Brady noted, “I would like to express my disappointment with the way that many of my peers and I were treated.” Jamal captured the full essence of this disappointment quite succinctly in his letter when he wrote, “You let us down.”

Based on the concerns reported by the Black and Latino males in this study, we hope that this chapter will serve as a wake-up call to teachers. Many teachers across the United States believe that Black and Latino males do not want to achieve in the classroom. Fortunately, this chapter weakens that sentiment a bit; it pushes for the reality that these students are very concerned about their academic futures and hope their teachers would propel them to reach their full potential.

References


