An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Black Males in Two East Midlands Further Education (FE) Colleges

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to develop an understanding of how Black males received and perceived education within the further education (FE) sector in England. Using phenomenological inquiry and narratives provided by the Black males I consider how they engaged with education in the post compulsory sector and their views regarding the quality of their educational experience while studying at college. I explore the encounters they experienced in terms of accessing the taught curriculum, their experiences of the institutional cultures in FE and the relationships they were able to form with college staff members. I suggest that race is an underlying feature of many of these encounters and influenced both the nature and the outcome of the encounter. I examine how Black males chose to interact with structures and systems and the mechanisms they developed to help them navigate education, including accessing staff, peer and family support and how these different systems were significant to their achievement within colleges. By using phenomenological inquiry, I present a challenge to some of the more popular presentations of Black males and demonstrate how some Black males use their own agency to promote success within education.

The main ethnographic work for this inquiry was completed in two, medium-sized, general FE colleges in the east Midlands over a period of fifteen months from October 2005 until December 2006 and employed multiple techniques including observation, focus groups, individual interviews and photographic techniques together with an analysis of numerical data of student achievement, to produce rich, contextualised, composite pictures of the educational journeys of Black males in FE within the two study colleges.

Using the data assembled I review how education systems could be organised in order to provide Black males with a better chance of achieving academic success in education and how education systems need to respond to more effectively meet the needs of this group.

Acknowledgements

I generally do not endorse sound bites, however, I am a big advocate of 'TEAM', an acronym for 'Together Everyone Achieves More'. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to have been part of a team whose collective efforts enabled me to produce this thesis. While I have been the primary researcher and I have taken responsibility for writing this thesis, I could not have achieved this without the encouragement and help of many, many others. However, I alone take responsibility for any shortcomings, errors or mistakes contained within this thesis.

I would like to begin by thanking my long suffering and tolerant workmates and friends who I have known over the years for the way they patiently listened to my early ill-formed ideas and beliefs. Through their rigorous and sometimes fierce tutoring, I was able to turn these initial thoughts into crafted arguments. In many ways they have been co-designers of this research and my constant peer reviewers. Without their investment, care and concern, this inquiry would not have been possible.

However, as with all endeavours, there are those whose help has had particular significance. This tribute is reserved for my extensive supervisory team, Morwenna Griffiths, Tony Cotton, Roy Corden, Sue Wallace and Cecile Wright. Each of them, in different ways, challenged and stretched my thinking, adding their wisdom to my work and helping to turn it into a study with value. I am truly grateful for their untiring support and guidance. I also want to express my sincere gratitude to all the research participants who so willingly, openly and candidly engaged in this inquiry. Only through their involvement, has it been possible to write this thesis.

Special thanks is reserved for my family (my Mum, my late Dad who is no longer around to enjoy the outcome of this inquiry, my brother Icah, my late brother Adrian and my brother Lance) who have always believed in me, and my husband Neil and my son Ben who helped to keep me on track by saying the right words at the right times. You are, and remain my source of inspiration, without you this study would not have happened.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my examining team for sharing their words and experience with me and guiding me towards concluding this study.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Asijeuliza, hanalo ajifunzalo

Those that do not ask questions have nothing to learn (Swahili Proverb)

Farsi, 1981, p5

This research focuses on the lived experiences of Black males as they navigated their way through the Further Education (FE) sector. A fuller explanation of the term Black is provided in section *4.1.1 Black* and maleness is explored in section *7.1 Representing the Research Participants*. Without suggesting that there is one homogenous Black community, this thesis is deeply influenced by the cultural features of the Black community. Accordingly I felt it was appropriate to begin this thesis with an African proverb which relates to the very nature of research and symbolises the oral traditions of Black people in the UK and elsewhere.

Research is not a spontaneous, self generating entity and only occurs if choices are made to initiate the research process. This research began because I decided to ask questions and although there has been much previous work on the experiences of Black people in education in the UK, guided by the Swahili proverb, I believed there was still more to learn, particularly in relation to learners in the post-compulsory sector.

My inquiry is a product of multiple intersections, in location, in time, with individuals and communities in which I live and work and with opportunities and resources that have been made available at various times. It is a mosaic, a tapestry of events, happenings and experiences. It is also a product of different stages of my development, which are fluid, and I continually move through and between these different phases often returning to ideas and reformulating them in the light of new understandings. This inquiry is as much a product of there and then, as it is a result of here and now and will hopefully persist to become a feature of after and later.

I will use this, the first chapter of my thesis, to provide an overview of my study and to support the reader in understanding both the construction of my inquiry and the structure of this thesis. I will do this in three ways:

- firstly I will explain the context of my research;
- secondly I will identify and explain the evolution of my research question;

- and finally I will describe how I have chosen to organise this thesis and why I have chosen to structure my work in this way.

1.1 Introducing the Context of the Research

Within the UK there is a, 'broad understanding of equality ... (which) informs many state systems of schooling' (Terzi, 2008, p1). Further, 'the dominant understanding of educational equality in contemporary Anglo-American political discourse is meritocratic' (Brighouse, Tooley and Howe, 2010, p27), the same 'liberal, democratic, meritocratic ideals' (Wright, Standen and Patel, 2010, p117) which dictate that it is a student's abilities which should determine their experience of and success within the education system. However, while there appears to be an acceptance of the principle of equality in education, not all groups are able to access education in the same way or enjoy an equal experience of education. Some groups, it seems, are positively disadvantaged by the education system and Gillborn argues that inequalities are so structurally ingrained within the system that the failure and marginalisation of some groups is 'inevitable and permanent under current circumstances' (2008, p45). Black students appear to be one such group, experiencing both academic underachievement and a hostile social environment within the statutory sector, a system which is 'favourable towards one race against another' (Ouseley in Byfield, 2008, px) and which systematically disadvantages Black learners through 'structural inequalities in schooling' (John, 2010, Guardian online).

In her research, Rhamie found that 'most Black children face negative experiences at school' and 'this was found to be true for all groups of every level of attainment' (2007, p12). Gillborn adds further weight to this argument when he highlights that white students of the same gender and socio-economic location 'are more likely to succeed than their peers from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Other and Dual Heritage (White/Black Caribbean) backgrounds' (2008, p56), demonstrating how academic school success appears to be predicated on ethnic origin rather than capability, and virtually *all* minority ethnic groups in the same school environments are likely to do less well than their white counterparts, thus confirming earlier research completed by Coard (1971), Swann (1985), Gillborn and Mirza (2003), the London Development Agency (2004) and Tikly, Haynes, Caballera, Hill and Gillborn (2006).

When considering Black students' social interactions in schools, research indicates a similarly challenging picture for Black male students. In common with other earlier research by Sewell (1997) and Blair (2001), in her research Rhamie also found that Black students regularly experienced negative:

> *interactions with teachers and staff which leave them feeling that they have been treated differently or unfairly compared to other children. They also find a general lack of encouragement from teachers as well as negative, sometimes racist interaction with other children.*
> 2007, p12

The causes of this situation are multiple and complex. However an education system which is organised on an 'unspoken assumption of white-as-norm' (Jensen, 2011, p21) in which systems and structures are organised 'from the perspective of white people' (ibid, p27) and imagines provision for the white community is suitable for *all* communities is unlikely to realise a goal of equality. To achieve educational equality would necessarily mean recognising and providing for difference so that all learners had 'an equal chance to develop and fulfil personal interests and talents' (Terzi, 2008, p1).

Despite the unhelpful and damaging stereotypes of Black males which portray Black males as displaying characteristics of 'toughness, sexual promiscuity, manipulation, thrill-seeking, and a willingness to use violence to resolve interpersonal conflict' (Majors and Billson, 1992, p34), it is important for those working within education to remember that:

> *Black boys are not a homogenous group. Contrary to popular view, they are not synonymous with underachievement. Many do achieve academically yet the press is littered with headlines about the underachievement of Black boys and a plethora of academic research focuses on the negative outcomes of their schooling. This persistent deficit model reinforces negative stereotypes and adversely affects their expectations, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.*
>
> Byfield, 2008, p3

My research inquiry looks beyond the experiences and achievements of Black males in the statutory sector and considers what happens to Black males when they enter the FE sector. It builds on the work of other researchers (for example Blair, 2001; Byfield, 2008; Rhamie, 2007;

Sewell, 1997, 2004, 2009) and explores if, when in a different learning environment, Black males have a different experience of education and whether this different environment consequently produces different educational outcomes.

1.2 The Evolution of My Research Question

For my inquiry I chose to explore the lived experiences of Black Males in FE. However, this research topic did not 'arrive' as a neatly formed project but was formulated over a considerable period of time as result of different events and experiences I have been part of.   I began working in the FE sector in 1991 after working as a secondary teacher and as an Advisor for two different Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in the East Midlands and remained within FE for 15 years. From earlier study, working as a teacher, advisor and as a volunteer in two different Saturday Supplementary schools for Black children, I had an awareness of the experiences of Black males in the statutory sector and while teaching in FE I became interested in how Black males experienced education in colleges compared to the secondary sector.

I also began to think about other, more personally connected experiences that been significant to me during my life. Why were two of my brothers continually at odds with the education system to the point that these two brothers could not leave compulsory education quickly enough? Was my Dad right, when he located his sons' difficult relationship with education as entirely a creation of their making? Why did this also seem to be the experience of many of my male cousins? Why did Friday afternoon at primary school appear to be a parade of Black boys walking to the headteacher's office to receive the cane for assorted (usually unknown) misdemeanours? How did so many Black males manage to end up on the wrong side of discipline systems in schools? What was happening to create these situations? Was this same experience replicated in the FE sector? And, most importantly what did the Black males themselves think about these different situations and what were their perceptions of these circumstances?

All of these questions were significant in forming my thinking, however, I recognised working as a lone researcher it would be too difficult for me to try and explore all the different issues I was interested in. I therefore decided to focus on my then work environment, FE, and to work with Black males to try and find out what was their experience of attending and studying in a college. My four key research questions were:

- How do Black males perceive and receive education in the FE sector?
- What were the daily lived experiences of this group?
- What was the level of discrimination in FE? And
- How well do Black males achieve in FE?

To encapsulate these four questions, the final form of my research question became 'What Are the Lived Experiences of Black Males in FE?'

This thesis puts Black males and their experiences at the heart of answering this question and by enabling these students to tell their personal and different stories, informs the reader of the daily realities of life in FE for Black males. Further, I wanted to use my research as a vehicle of 'putting back the voices that were left out' (Levy, 2010, p318). Although Levy is specifically referring to slave narratives in her work much writing, including education texts, describing the experiences of Black people are 'written by white people with different viewpoints' (ibid, p319). I wanted to use my research and this thesis to contribute to addressing this omission. While I 'do not wish to make any claims about the quality of the stories which are at the centre' (Clough, 2002, p5) of this inquiry I believe that I have been able to work with the young Black males who participated in this research to support them and have 'successfully laid bare some of the ways in which meaning is created and communicated' (ibid) through the stories they generously shared with me.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as a journey, which in many regards has mirrored my thinking and developing understanding of issues. It has no natural start point. Similarly there is not a given endpoint. Indeed, because I have constantly revisited ideas and revised my thinking it could have began or ended in any number of places. However, I have been obliged to decide how I will record my work and what order to locate the chapters. I will use this section to explain the logic I used when determining the final order of the chapters for this thesis.

I have used the opening of this thesis to provide an introduction to the context of the study and to explain how I developed my research question. This chapter also acts a navigational tool for the rest of the thesis indicating to the reader the sequence of the work and what they can expect

to find in each of the separate chapters. It is a useful starting point for my work as it helps the reader to understand what will be covered in the body of this work and locates my inquiry relative to the rest of the educational landscape, indicating how and where FE is positioned relative to secondary and higher education.

Recognising, accepting and believing that research is not only influenced by the focus of the subject and the environment in which it occurs, but also critically by those who complete research (Kincheloe, 1991; Griffiths, 1998) I have used Chapter 2 to inform the reader of my personal positioning and the influences that informed the research process. This chapter is intended to provide the reader with an understanding of me as an individual and how this personal location has been significant in conducting this inquiry, writing and structuring my research. It gives the reader some indication of the choices I consciously made during this process. This chapter does not describe my life story, but it provides the reader with such information they would need in order for them to make an assessment of the value of this inquiry and for them to form an opinion on the findings and validity of this work. It indicates my personal positioning and explains, to a degree, my personal value system.

The reader also needs to gain an understanding of the location of the inquiry, in terms of the structural location of the sector, the geographical location of the research site and an awareness of the participants who engaged in the study. An understanding of these three features is essential to appreciating both the background to and resultant findings of this study. Chapter 3 provides this information. It begins by describing the FE environment of the study, and importantly gives information on the historical origins of the sector. This information is needed to understand the culture of the FE sector, and why certain values are so deeply embedded in the sector.   Similarly the local geography has impacted on the development of the character of the two research colleges and it was important to give the reader an indication of the locality. The last section of this chapter provides more detailed information of the two research colleges and the research participants. This was one of the more difficult sections to write, as it could have potentially comprised participant and institutional confidentiality. However, because neither all Black males, nor all colleges are the same it was important to supply this information. To achieve this and to maintain confidentiality, I have given more information on the age of each establishment, the size of the student population and the range of programmes offered by the colleges. In describing the research participants, I have tried to show the differences between the group in terms of age, family situation and socio-economic location.

This information is needed to help construct an understanding of the types of experiences the participants brought with them to the research and to demonstrate the heterogeneity within the group.

Chapter 4 locates my study into the existing canon of academic literature, ranging from the pivotal report produced by Coard in 1971, through early government reports (Rampton, 1981; Swann 1985) to contemporary current day literature including for example Sewell, 2008 and Gillborn, 2008. The range of literature available to describe the experiences of Black males in education is significant in itself, as it charts the development of an issue which was originally constructed as only having fringe interest, relevant solely to minority ethnic populations, to an issue which has become so significant that the promotion of equality and diversity now forms one of the limiting grades in FE college inspections. The literature demonstrates how race has migrated over time, from being an issue that only concerned the Black community, to an issue of importance for all those who work in education. The progressive growth of UK based literature further reveals how this issue has developed into a subject with national importance. The academic achievement of Black people in both FE and secondary sectors is reviewed and the academic attainment of Black males relative to Black females is compared. The social positioning and presentation of Black males in both sectors is also compared in this chapter. Each of these features is significant to the composite Black experience of education, and the chapter shows there is not a single Black community experience, but that this experience is gendered and there are different experiences according to ethnic grouping. The chapter also provides definitions of terms important to the study and discusses and compares the differing cultures of secondary schools and FE colleges.

Having used the first four chapters of this thesis to provide a contextual and theoretical framework for my inquiry, I use Chapter 5 to describe the research methodology. This chapter is located at this juncture, because it mirrored my thought processes and the research journey I engaged with. It represented the point at which I moved from constructing an agenda for my research, to making serious decisions on how I would conduct my investigation. For me, to discuss methodological considerations without providing the necessary background context appeared premature. Further by locating the chapter at this point, immediately before discussing the findings of my research, it supports the reader to make immediate links back to the range of research approaches used in this inquiry. Clough and Nutbrown (2007) argue that research methodology is not a matter of selecting, but that the research focus itself makes the

chosen methodology almost inevitable, as no other methodological approach would be able to adequately address the primary research question. In Chapter 5 I discuss the choices and decisions I made when identifying the methodological location of my inquiry and the research instruments I used and created to explore the research question. As research has a moral as well as an exploratory dimension, I also use this chapter to discuss the significant and multiple ethical issues presented in conducting research of this nature. Finally, I use the chapter to explain the processes I used to identify the organising themes of my inquiry.

Having detailed the methodological location of my inquiry and the way in which I conducted my research, I use Chapter 6 to present my research findings and the emergent knowledge constructed according to the nine key organising themes presented in Chapter 5. This is the longest chapter in my thesis and I have purposely chosen to present *all* findings together as they are inter-related and interdependent. To have separated and divided the themes would have been to construct unhelpful, artificial and contrived barriers.   Keeping all the findings together, I believe supports the reader in maintaining links between the thematic headings and preserves the integrity of the inquiry and its outcomes. Chapter 6 is a mixture of voices. There is my voice as the researcher, together with verbatim responses from the research participants. This was a conscious decision, for although I had the option to paraphrase comments made by the research participants I chose not to do this, as I believed the participants themselves spoke with the greatest authority on their experiences of FE. To rephrase the participants' words appeared to me to be both disrespectful to the participants and unethical, and I use the words of the research participants as a medium for them to tell their personal stories to the reader. While accepting that the research participants are recognised experts on their own experience, and have the greatest understanding of their lives and daily realities, I have supported their observations by linking their comments back to existing published sources where appropriate.

Chapter 7 is a discussion of the themes and knowledge presented in Chapter 6. I chose to locate my chapter on knowledge construction and validity after detailing my findings, as I wanted the reader to appreciate the context of the inquiry and its outcomes, before discussing the epistemological framework in which the emergent knowledge was located. I chose to order my work in this way, as I believed the discussion of epistemology was clearer and more accessible, once the context had been disclosed. I use the chapter to explain how my findings, while situated geographically, temporally and culturally, both achieve validity and provide an accurate representation of the research participants and the research findings, and can therefore

be accepted as new knowledge which both enriches and adds to our existing understanding of the educational experiences of Black males.

I use Chapter 8, the final chapter of this thesis, to bring together the key themes of my inquiry. In this chapter, I look back to the original research question and forwards to possible new futures. I use the chapter to consider the multiple impacts of my inquiry and in what ways it made a difference to and for the research participants, the wider community and personally to me. I consider how successful FE has been in achieving its ambition of being a different offer, and what systems have been useful in supporting Black males in their journey through education. Finally, both optimistically and ambitiously, I identify an agenda for change for FE and consider possible new developments that may be supportive to Black males and how such developments might be achieved before ending on a closing cautionary note which considers potential obstacles that might prevent these suggestions from becoming a reality.

1.4 Chapter Summary

My intentions for this chapter were simple and narrow– I wanted to provide the reader with sufficient information to have an initial understanding of the context for this inquiry, to be able to begin to develop an appreciation of how I produced my research question, to have an awareness of the decisions I made when determining how to structure this thesis and to give some indication of my reasons for making these choices. This first chapter acts as a navigational aid to guide the reader through this thesis and purposively only provides brief details of the contents of each chapter. This, my first chapter, is intentionally short and it does not aim to give extensive detail, rather its purpose is to present the reader with a clear, succinct and focussed introduction to my study which encourages the reader to want to read the rest of the study. Using the participants' detailed and personal stories as the focus of my inquiry I have sought to 'make public those experiences and perceptions that other methodological approaches and research techniques are unable to reveal' (Clough, 2002, pxii) and to provide Black males with a vehicle to give voice to their experiences of the FE sector.

CHAPTER TWO: LOCATING MYSELF AS A RESEARCHER

The purpose of this chapter is make clear my personal connections to the research question, to the research participants and to the context in which the study occurred, because making 'the researcher's background and position in the field is being increasingly recognised as important to the total research process' (Ram, 1996, p115). In doing this I aim to provide a clear view of my personal position and to support the reader towards a better understanding of my research, because 'knowing something of the writer's identity and intentions helps in responding' to the researcher's work (Griffiths, 1998, p4).

Social research is connected to a number of different factors and influences and does not, and cannot, exist in a vacuum. The four key features which I consider my research is connected to and are pertinent to my inquiry are:

- my personal location as a researcher (which is explored in this chapter);
- the community in which the research was located (described in section *3.2 Profile of the Two Research Colleges*);
- the research participants who engaged with the study (detailed in section *3.3 Profile of the Research Participants*);
- and the processes and techniques I used to carry out the research (identified in section *5.5 Selecting and Developing Research Techniques and Tools*).

Viewed in this way, research is not a disembodied, isolated process, but is fundamentally linked with the contextual features which define and determine the research. For those involved in large-scale commissioned research , the way in which research projects are designed will necessarily be influenced by the 'likelihood that a funding body will back the research' (Griffiths, 1998, p106). To a degree then, the boundaries and remit of commissioned research are defined by the research funders. For some researchers the externally determined specifications of this type of research may weaken and limit the connections between the researcher and the inquiry. In direct contrast, small scale, unfunded research, designed and developed by individual researchers is often directly linked to the passions and interests of the researcher. In this type of research the connections between the researcher and the research are often more immediate and intimate, with the lines of communication and relationships between the researcher and the research much more readily apparent. In this scenario, the researcher not

only completes the research, but in many cases works to positively strengthen connections between themselves and the research and the communities in which the research is located.

My research, presented in this thesis, falls into the second category. It is small scale, unfunded, social research which began with my own personal interest. In this chapter I will explain and explore the many different ways in which I am connected to the research, and the importance of these different features. In this way I hope to support readers in making sense of my research findings and to enable them to formulate a clear view of the significance of my research.

2.1 The Significance of Personal Location

My personal location is a significant feature of my research, and it is important that I take the time to make this location clear, so that the reader has sufficient information to place me within a temporal, historical and societal context. The reader can then use this information to inform their understanding of my research. When introducing her research, Sinclair (2004) considers her personal location to be so critical and so salient that she provides the reader with the following biographical information about herself:

> *I am a daughter, granddaughter, sister, aunt, cousin, British, African and Caribbean, a member of the community.*
> Sinclair, 2004, p98

This factual information provides the reader with details on the researcher's gender, familial connections and an indication of the researcher's nationality. This information is meaningful, within the context of reading social research, because it enables us to place Sinclair within our own personal and conceptual framework of the world and indicates to us how Sinclair defines herself. The information has further significance as it may also influence how we read and understand her findings. Sinclair's biographical details enable us to start to form a view of Sinclair as a researcher, and allow us to make an initial assessment of the value we may eventually place on her findings.

Sinclair's very personalised initial introduction effectively provides us with a route into our 'world shortcuts', from which we make sense of and interpret the world. What do we know of and think of women, British, African and Caribbean people? How does this influence our perceptions of what they say? What value do we ascribe to their voice? Using the information

that Sinclair provides, and mapping this onto our own understanding of the world, we can then begin to interpret and make sense of her findings within the context of our own beliefs and values.

Such open positioning allows us to make an initial determination on whether or not we are like the researcher in any way. This potential point of connection is significant, for now there is a possibility of being connected to the researcher, and by implication to the research, through a common bond. The researcher and the research have now both become less distant, and to a degree, I am invited into a shared world of understanding, meaning and kinship. The research is no longer about 'something out there, which happens to someone, somewhere else', but as a consequence of establishing a connection, starts to have a more direct and personal relevance for me. As a result of making this contact apparent, I am simultaneously drawn into and towards the research for I now have a degree of personal contact. Finally such connections are important as they influence my assessment of the authenticity and accuracy of the research findings, and, more crucially, will determine if I believe the research has any validity.

As significant and revealing as the brief vignette Sinclair provides is, she believes this geographical and family information is insufficient to locate her adequately, and she goes onto say:

> *Although I spend much of my time in the world of education, it is my heritage, not my professional title and position that is central to my identity. My family name tells me my place in Caribbean history. To be disconnected from that identity means losing out not only on the capacity to explain who I am to others but also the possibility of truly knowing myself.*
> 2004, p98

This fuller description provides details of Sinclair's working life, but crucially she does not believe her employment is fundamental to the construction of her identity. Sinclair considers her Caribbean heritage the most critical feature of her identity and it is this cultural connection that directly informs Sinclair's ability to know herself and explain herself to others. Although Sinclair's description is not racialised, or one which specifically denotes her ethnicity, she indicates that it is her culture which defines her, and by implication her culture would have, in some way, come to influence the way in which she designed, completed and reported her

research. The point of making identity and location known is also emphasised by Griffiths who, when giving an account of her research, positions herself as a 'white woman, born and partly brought up in colonial Africa' (1998, p5). Once again, I am given the opportunity to learn about the researcher as a person and I am invited into the researcher's world, and shown part of their lives. By doing this the researcher not only enables us to make connections with the research, but as a reader, I am also better placed to confront any stereotypes or assumptions I may have which could affect my ability to understand the study. Thus, for many researchers, particularly those in the social sciences, identity and location are, and remain, a fundamental feature of reporting their research findings.

2.1.1 My Personal Location

Like Sinclair my personal identity, my sense of self and understanding of self in the world is important to me, for it is my identity which both defines my being and determines my actions. I want to, and feel the need to share information about my identity, so that my audience can use this information to locate me in relation to my research. I want my audience to begin to *know* me and to develop an understanding of my location so they can use this information to help them decide on the value and relevance of my research, for 'if readers are to truly understand the participants' stories the readers need to know about the stories and positions of the researchers' (Liamputtong, 2007, p185). In making these disclosures I leave myself 'vulnerable to the criticism of self-indulgence and the charges that (I) disclose aspects of (my) life that are too personal and hence not of interest' (ibid). I do not believe that the information I have given is self-indulgent. I have provided such information that is relevant and pertinent to this inquiry, in terms of my history, experience and motivation. These factors *are* material to this study because they have been influential in shaping my actions and my thoughts. Without such information the reader will not be able to appreciate the important influences which have impacted upon and informed the genesis and development of this investigation. Further this information is epistemologically significant as it gives the reader a route into the mind of the 'knower' and informs them of some of the value systems which have shaped and generated the knowledge claims made by this study.

There are many theories relating to identity formation. Walker asserts that 'personal identities are constructed by gender, race and ethnicity, class and sexual orientation' (2007, online) and Hall places particular emphasis on race as 'a critical part of identity formation' (2005, p103). While some of these features are biological factors (gender) others are more fluid (class) and to

a degree are influenced by choice and preferred alignments. If, however, race and gender are identified as key features of identity then 'there are limits to how far we can opt in and out of our identities (and we) have to incorporate, negotiate and/or contest representations of gender and skin colour' (Howarth, 2002, p158). The importance of race is further emphasised by Lacy who states that 'race matters because society has decided that it does' (2004, p913) echoing the views of Howarth who asserts 'in some senses (our) identities are imposed onto us' (2002, p158) and we only have limited opportunities to influence and construct a personal identity.

For my research I explored the lived experiences of Black males in FE. Because of the issues of race and identity, and because of the relationship race has in constructing general and intimate experiences, to present this research without informing the reader of *my* identity and *my* relationship to the research, would render the my research findings incomplete, and provide a platform to challenge the research findings. I have a duty towards the research community, towards my currently 'imagined audience' (Griffiths, 1998, p4) and most critically, towards the research participants, to make this information known, and to be as clear as I possibly can about my own position. These connections are important in helping to explain my interpretations of the research and subsequent knowledge claims. Unless I make these connections transparent, I take the risk of turning my research into a disembodied, exploitative, scholarly pursuit, which would have diminished relevance for the research participants, the research community and audiences beyond, with the only clearly identifiable beneficiary of the research, being me, as the researcher.

In common with Sinclair and like all researchers, I have multiple features to my identity which influence and affect the way I work, interact and, most importantly within this context, the way in which I conducted my research inquiry. Primarily I describe myself as a Black woman, acknowledging the significance of these two features in identity construction. I also have other important features which make up my identity: I am middle-aged, a parent, a partner, a teacher and work colleague, and although social class in the UK is not determined by socio-economic location at birth, I certainly grew up in a working class family, the child of a Black Jamaican father and a white English mother, and my own value system has been strongly influenced by both of these different features. All of these facets were significant to my ability to conduct the research; the way in which I carried out the investigation and the relationship I developed with the research participants over the course of the inquiry. Paradoxically while my race served to bring me closer to the research participants and facilitated the research process, the other

defining feature of my identity, my gender, served to distance and set me apart from the research participants.

My Caribbean heritage has been fundamental in constructing my internal personal identity and my external visible identity. It is a distinguishing feature, which in common with the research participants, would classify me as a Black person in the UK. I also fulfil Nehusi and Gosling's (2001) definition of Black in that my father travelled from Jamaica and settled in the UK, thus making me a descendant of the Caribbean (see *4.1.1 Black* for further discussion). Although I have 'one Black and one non-Black parent' (Rockquemore, 2002, p485) and could, using US terminology, describe myself as biracial, this terminology is not widely used or acknowledged in the UK. Furthermore, I choose to describe myself as Black as I am 'recognised in society as Black' (ibid) and I enjoy 'being Black and participating in a community of Blacks' (Lacy, 2004, p911). My description of myself is therefore biologically and societally determined and an elective description of choice. Moreover, in choosing to adopt this description, I am subscribing to the same definition I used for the research participants, which required that the participants actively chose to describe themselves as Black, and acknowledged historical attachments, as well as contemporary realities. In this way I am like the research participants, who as an insider would be in a 'special position in terms of understanding (those) shared aspects of experience' (Bridges, 2004, p73). My race and ethnicity bind me to the research participants through a common heritage, and a contemporary understanding of some of the issues associated with being a Black person living in the UK today. I assert that these features configure me as an insider, someone with whom the research participants would be willing to, and could safely, share confidences (a fuller discussion of these issues is provided in the next section, *2.1.2 The Insider/Outsider Dilemma*).

My social class is also important in this research, and although 'an identity cannot be simply read off from a socio-economic position' (Griffiths, 1998, p5), coming from a Black working class background gave me a further point of contact with most of the research participants. I am not suggesting my historical experiences of growing up in Britain and attending schools in the 1960s and 1970s are a direct parallel to the research participants' modern-day realities, but this past experience gave me a measure of understanding some of the issues associated with schooling and education, and so equipped me with knowledge which facilitated our general understanding of each other.

The issue of class requires further clarification here, for it is one of the more problematic features of my identity. When my father arrived in the UK on the 'Empire Windrush' in 1948 at Tilbury Docks, London, he had a suitcase with his entire material possessions and ten shillings. He was taken to Clapham Underground shelter where he remained for a week before being moved under the 'direction of labour' scheme, to begin work for an engineering firm in Chippenham. I assert that this made my father, at the time, working class. However, although my father arrived in the country, the child of peasant farmers, he held middle class aspirations and believed he could move into the professional classes. He believed that England, 'The Mother Country', would provide these opportunities. Although his aspirations may not have been achieved, he firmly believed that it was possible, through hard work to 'better yourself' and move through the social strata. This aspirational, achievement orientated focus challenges the Bourdieusian concept of those having little adjusting their expectations and being satisfied with less. My father had little and wanted much more.

In contrast my mother, whose father, an ordinary seaman, had been killed when HMS Firedrake was sunk in 1942, had been deeply conditioned to 'know her place' and not to challenge the existing social order. Her expectations were to go direct from school to work in a factory. She knew no-one who had ever left the social group into which they had been born, and did not expect to do so herself, for she had no model to demonstrate this was possible. My mother, also working class, began work in a printing factory when she was 14. My father's attitudes may have been representative of being a migrant in 1948, and my mother's attitudes may have equally been representative of a white working class female, but it was my father's attitudes that prevailed in terms of aspirations, and although I was born into a working class background, from a very early age, I was encouraged to aspire to more middle class aspirations and to realise the goal of entering the professional classes that my father had not been able to achieve. To misquote Oscar Wilde from his play 'Lady Windermere's Fan' (Lord Darlington, Act III), my father had been 'born in the gutter, but was looking at the stars' (Holland, 1997, p145) and if he had been unable to reach them he was going to do all he could to support his children in reaching them. While such conventional middle class aspirations could have served to distance me from the research participants, the reality of being born to working class parents and growing up in a working class home provided me with a firm basis to connect with the research participants. And yet I need to acknowledge that my personal success orientated views could have been at odds with some of the participants. Further, my father's views of hard work as a

requisite of success, which I have inherited, does not fit easily into the contemporary view of 'get-rich-quick', which has become prevalent among some sectors of youth culture.

While my race served to facilitate access to the research terrain, my gender, the other principal feature of my identity, marked me as an outsider - a potentially suspicious interloper. I cannot claim first-hand experience of being a Black male navigating the UK education system. My closest personal point of contact to this experience is having three brothers, and hearing of and witnessing some of the experiences they had as they moved through the various education sectors. Although this is personal experience, it is not *my* experience, and I can only reflect upon reported events rather than my own lived reality. Thus, both as a young person growing up in the UK and as an older person working in education and completing research, I have been and remain, to a degree, an outsider to the research participants in certain respects. My outsider status at the time of completing the research was further compounded by my employment status as a member of the teaching staff in the first urban college. In this role the research participants could have viewed me as a member of a potentially repressive and controlling regime, in which all staff, and especially teachers, were habitually viewed as 'the enemy', regardless of whether or not they held any community connections, and in which all Black males identified themselves as members of oppressed community (see *4.2. The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and Further Education Sectors* and *4.3 The Social Positioning of Black Males in Secondary Schools and FE* for further details).

I explore some of the ambiguities and tensions created by my insider/outsider status during this research in more detail in section 2.1.2 below. This dual identity, while providing benefits in terms of access, also created difficulties resulting from divided and competing loyalties, as I sought to reconcile my professional responsibilities to my employer, with my ethical and my perceived community responsibilities to the research participants.

2.1.2 The Insider/Outsider Dilemma

The outsider/insider paradox is an interesting feature of this investigation. Usefully, within the context of this research, my 'membership of an ethnic minority group' (De Laine, 2000, p105) helped to confirm my claim to be an insider and assisted me in gaining the trust of the research participants. Other researchers have also used their cultural heritage to verify their insider status. When speaking of his work in different West Midlands clothing factories Ram asserts his ethnic 'background enabled (him) to be an 'insider'' (1996, p121), and he used this as a

means to help him gain the trust of the participants. My insider status similarly facilitated 'access to back regions' (De Laine, 2000, p52) where information could be openly shared, and through my 'intimate knowledge of the nuances, idiosyncrasies and customs' (Ram, 1996, 121) I was able to access restricted zones and gain privileged information. I this way I was able to build up an authentic picture of the 'understandings of those being researched on' (De Laine, 2000, p57) which served to 'deepen (my) understanding' (Ram, 1996, p124) of the research participants' experiences.

Hertz claims that:

> As "situated actors" we bring to each interview our own histories. To make sense of what we observe or what people tell us, we may draw on the richness of our own experience, particularly if what we are studying we have also experienced. Parts of the interview may echo our own thoughts or prompt us to recall parts of our own lives.

1997, pxiii

In this research, I was able to utilise my position as an insider to help me better understand the participants' stories because of the similarities in my own experiences. I used this shared understanding to allow me explore areas which may not be immediately apparent to an outsider and probe regions which may have been concealed. In this way I was able to use my understanding to work collaboratively with the research participants to build a shared picture of their contemporary realities.

Even though my insider status allowed me access to areas which may be denied to other researchers, it is important to remember that according to Ram 'the insider role is neither uniform nor unvarying' (1996, p113), nor does it consistently or unerringly provide automatic right of entry. 'Access issues involve questions about relationships and particular questions about trust between researcher and researched' (ibid, p118) and in this regard any privileges granted by the research participants at a particular instance, could not be regarded as blanket caveat to cover all circumstances, but needed to be maintained through 'a continuous process of winning people's trust' (ibid, p122). To have any hope of keeping the research participants' trust, I needed to remain constantly vigilant to ensure that I did not exploit the research participants or 'intrude into other people's lives and systematically violate others with (my) probing and questioning' (De Laine, 2000, p65). Yet, it is important to remember that my insider status, despite affording me access to cherished information, did not confer a special

ability 'to articulate the implicit ordering of daily life' (Erikson and Shultz, 1992, p481) or 'automatically attach(ed) special authority' (Bridges, 2004, p75) to the research findings. A further challenge to the position of insider research, is that the insider who does not 'sufficiently question the vagaries' (Ram, 1996, p127) or contradictions revealed by their research will be restricted to providing only a partial, and potentially distorted, account of the participants' experiences.

Although the research participants on seeing me and talking to me (and in some cases being taught by me) would either know or could guess something of my cultural and historical connections, and might of their own volition, identify me as an insider, they could not know or determine the importance of my cultural positioning by appearance alone. They could not know where my allegiances lay or 'what sort' of Black person I was. This was a personal and a professional issue for me. While my own community location connected me to these young people through a shared ancestry and a commonality of experiences of being part of a minority ethnic community, professional working relationships obliged me to align myself, at least to a degree, with my employer. Indeed, some employers have come to expect a certain level of allegiance which obliges employees to prioritise the needs of the employer above those of family, friends and certainly students. However, the potential difficulty I may have encountered by the research participants believing I was on the employer's side was mitigated by the working patterns I had established over the years of working at the first urban college. During my employment, I had developed a reputation of being a 'safe'[1] teacher (see *5.4, Using Qualitative Methods*). Nevertheless, because student populations are continually changing and being renewed in FE, I needed to reaffirm my position of 'being with and for the other' (De Laine, 2000, p55) on a regular basis, to new incoming cohorts of Black students. While this was, and remains my personal choice, such a choice raised issues regarding where and with whom, my loyalty and commitment lay.

While my race facilitated access, my gender and other differences prevented me from occupying a 'complete membership role" (Ram, 1996, p126). The gender differences between me and the research participants 'undoubtedly mediated the research process: and it is highly probable that the finer details of the (participants') culture' (ibid, p123) would have been more accurately captured by a researcher of the same gender. Unfortunately, on this occasion 'closer involvement was foreclosed by the particular nature of gender relations' (ibid, p125). De

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[1] Safe = youth slang for a trustworthy person

Laine, explores the tension of being an outsider researcher further and argues that 'where (research) subjects do not trust "outsiders" they may create their own "fronts" to impede the researcher's progress' (2000, p49). Because my interpretation of situations as an outsider could be significantly different to that of the research participants, my understanding is limited to being interpretative and thus on occasions struggles to claim to be the authentic voice of the research participants. However, despite these differences I maintain the position that 'the general processes at play' (Ram, 1996, p123) have been accurately captured and I have been able to provide a detailed portrait of the participants' experience of FE.

Being positioned as an outsider is not in itself automatically a disadvantage, for the researcher who can 'look at the setting as a "stranger" but is also able to be immersed in the social reality of group members' (De Laine, 2000, p63) is ideally placed to benefit from the advantages of having a dual outsider/insider identity. It is my claim, that this was the position I occupied during this research. My race enabled me to gain access to locations reserved for group members, while at the same time the distance created by my gender enabled me to complete 'unbiased, analytical work' (ibid, p105). I also assert that an outsider who asks questions which are beyond the understanding of the research participants may provide a 'useful and illuminating experience for the research subject in that they may have to return to first principles in reviewing their story' (Bridges, 2004, p75) and may even begin to question their own construction of reality and identity. In this way both the research participants and myself benefitted, as we were both able to reflect on our experiences in deeper, and sometimes new ways.

My positioning to the research participants was, and remains, complex, complicated and at times, frustrating. At one level, as a consequence of my race I am very much with and part of the group, as we share many common experiences and understandings. At another level separated by gender I am distant, different and set apart from the group. However, it is my claim that these two features combined synergetically and acted 'as an aid rather than an impediment' (Ram, 1996, 124) to the research experience. In this way I believe I gained maximum benefit from my dual identities - almost like an 'older aunt' I was sufficiently connected to understand something of their daily lives, while at the same time, I maintained the capacity to see their worlds as a stranger. This personal dichotomy of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider allowed me to reach a deeper understanding of the position of the research participants in my efforts to address the research question.

2.2 My Relation to the Research Question

A fundamental question to ask before beginning any research is, 'why research?' In scientific research which 'seeks to trace out cause-effect relationships' (Punch, 2005, p48) this question is, in some respects, easily answered, for the purpose of the research will be to solve problems. From this positivist perspective scientists 'argue that their concern is simply the establishment of facts through the judicious testing of hypotheses and theories (and) they are only, they would say, partisans for truth' (Silverman, 2004, p260). This configuration minimises personal involvement of the researcher and turns them into some kind of 'truth miner' or a epistemological technician seeking out the golden seams of knowledge. However, the question 'why research', is not so simple for those involved in social research, as researchers in this field are more often concerned with social phenomena and investigating situations and circumstances. As such social researchers may not have a 'specific hypothesis at the outset' (ibid, p4) of the research. To support the reader to more fully understand why I became involved in this research, I need to explain my personal location in relation to the research question and to clarify my relationship to the research question.

In Chapter 5, (see *5.1, Research Terminology Used in this Study*), I explain how my research, predicated on the foundations of 'social justice' (Griffiths, 1998, p3) was designed to explore, and ultimately improve, the lives of Black males in FE. While an understanding of how the research question was formulated and how the question relates to other conceptual frameworks is a critical part of the research, it does not explain why I became engaged in the research or how I am related to the research question. An essential part of the 'why' is unanswered.

I concluded the previous section by describing myself as an 'older aunt' of the research participants. In Chapter 6, I explore the participants' feelings of familial attachment to college staff, and how they felt a sense of closeness to the tutors. This closeness, this sense of 'fictive kinship' (Fordham, 1996, p283) is the starting point of this research, as I too felt attached to the participants, and it was this bond that initially motivated me to want to carry out the research.

All the research participants were Black males. Included in this group, although not part of this study, are my three brothers, my cousins, the friends I grew up with and later the students I taught in schools and colleges. I am intrinsically personally and professionally connected to

this group. I have read much on how Black males fail within the statutory system and on how mainstream provision does not appear to work for many Black males. Yet my own, albeit limited, experience provides examples of both success and failure within the statutory and post compulsory education sectors. In my direct family, while some of the males (and females) succeeded and prospered in education, others were, in echoes of Coard's (1971) seminal and still relevant findings, marginalised, labelled and failed. While some family members recovered from this early failure years later, after monumental personal effort, others did not.

From the students I have taught, I have witnessed firsthand how numbers of them had experiences similar to those of my family, and I have seen in FE how some 'failed' students have worked to promote their own recovery so they could move forward. The available literature (for example: Bhattachatyya, Ison and Blair, 2003; London Development Agency, 2004; Tikly, Haynes, Caballera, Hill and Gillborn, 2006) has much to say about the failure, but less to say about success (for a full discussion see Chapter 4, *Literature Review*). Like Rhamie's (2007) work on Black learners who had achieved some measure of success in the UK education system, I wished to explore through personal narratives, observation and reflection from my own life experiences, if there were alternative ways of navigating education, and what approaches worked for Black males in their journey through education. This is not to imply that the research was a personal or positivist crusade in search of a singular truth or an answer; rather it is my attempt to find out from the Black males themselves what their experience of FE was, what opportunities they had within the FE sector and to explore with them their views on what they believed supported or hindered them within this sector. My own personal interest and my own life experiences will almost inevitably mean that my interpretations will be influenced by my value positions and personal experience, and, the emergent knowledge could be challenged on these grounds, yet I intend to guard against distorting bias and imposing my own value set upon the research participants through active reflection , an 'openness to criticism' (Bridges, 2004, p86) and rigorous checking with the research participants themselves on the accuracy of my representations of their experience.

2.2.1 My Motivation to Complete the Research

Having personally positioned myself in relation to the research question I now need to offer an indication of the motivation for wishing to undertake this work. This has a long and very personal background, and is partly captured in an entry from my research journal.

> *Unfilled promises is key here. I am a first generation descendent of an Empire Windrush traveller. He took the flack. I had opportunities that were never available to him. He wanted so much and was given so little... chances he didn't have and the opportunities that weren't there.*
> Personal Research Journal, 20 October, 2006

However, my motivation to complete research were not just to fulfil the dreams and aspirations of my father by taking opportunities that were not available to him, but as a Black person, professionally situated to 'do something', I felt a moral imperative to engage in this research. I wanted to work with the participants to help them find and present their voice to a wider audience. With the consent of the participants, I have tried to be 'a kind of megaphone (for the participants) with which to talk to those they need to influence' (Griffiths, 1998, p139). I want to use this research:

> *To make changes to education policy at FE... to make it better for my nephews and cousins... to demonstrate to the decision makers there is another way*
> Personal Research Journal, 20 October, 2006

Although 'another way' might appear to imply a positivistic approach which smacks of singularity, and while not seeking to minimise the significance of personal agency, it is more a representation of my frustration, bewilderment and sometimes anger at a situation which allows so many Black males to fail and be failed by mainstream UK education. However, it is also true that sometimes, for some Black males, the education system works well and they are able to achieve and succeed. I wanted to explore what the situation was within FE – was it part of the continuum of failure and lost opportunities, or did it promote a model of best practice that may have applications in other sectors? 'Another way' simply refers to the opportunity for potential success within the education system as opposed to almost certain failure, acknowledging that there may be many different and varied routes to achieving success. It is not to suggest a simple answer, but to indicate there could be other more

successful strategies which policy makers and other professionals may be unaware of, but were known to the research participants. My desire to convey this information is a high ambition, and this same ambition obliged me to take action while engaging in 'respectful and responsible scholarship' (Bishop, 2000, p110), which allowed the participants' voice to be heard. I do not believe this single piece of research will necessarily achieve this ambition; yet by utilising my growing personal and professional networks, by remaining close to my genetic and extended fictive family, and by continuing to demonstrate an active commitment to social justice, I maintain the hope that at some point in the future things will be better for my nephews, cousins and all Black people in the UK education system, and that Black people will enjoy a more positive experience of education. To a degree, with the participants' consent, I have begun using this research to contribute to this goal by sharing the findings with the senior management team of the first urban college, and it is my intention to share this information more widely through dissemination at seminars and conferences. I have already begun this process and have presented some of these findings at BERA's annual conference in 2007 and 2008, in Valencia in 2011 and have been invited by the Network of Black Professionals (NBP) to share my findings at their annual conference.

2.3 Dilemmas in Writing – A Brief Word

> *The unsaid words pushed roughly against the thoughts that we had no craft to verbalise, and crowded the room to uneasiness*
> Angelou, 2001, p232

Throughout writing this thesis I have constantly been troubled by the inadequacy of words, and my inability to capture, to my satisfaction, the feelings, thoughts, beliefs, aspirations, experiences and hopes of the research participants I had the privilege to work with. I recognise that 'words are both limited and useful; they are neither magic nor nonsense' (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997, P195), but remain disturbed by 'the failure of the writing to convey the message' (Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul, 1997, p10) and I am fearful that my words are a hollow echo of the participants' realities. In spite of my best intentions I do not feel that I have allowed the participants to 'sing their songs' (Angelou, 2001, p5); to 'let the lions roar' (see *5.2.1 The Research Question and Phenomenology*); or to provide the 'very individual understanding of events' (Levy, 2010, p321) of the lives of Black males and all that remains is my limited and imperfect attempt at representing the participants' worlds and truths.

And yet writing is, for the most part, the usual vehicle of communication when presenting research. The writing can be and often is complemented with pictures, tables, graphs and charts, but it is the writing that is used to draw out the meaning of the findings. The writing is part of the problem – in itself it has no smell, feel, touch, taste or sound. It is two-dimensional and flat, confined to the boundaries of the words on the page. Poetry may, and does extend these boundaries, for it 'offers a better means to evocatively represent qualitative data' (Liamputtong, 2007, p178) and gives researchers 'alternative ways to reveal the lived experiences of vulnerable people' (ibid, p182). But, in the end, even poets are left with words on a page and I lack their craft and skill. This thesis is not poetry. It is a record of my research, my findings and my analysis of these findings, even if it lacks the lyricism of Maya Angelou. I have struggled, edged and crept towards meaning, often without a map and no compass. I have tried to breathe life into the words, to bring them alive, and to let them speak to the reader 'without "othering" (the) research participants, exploiting them or leaving them voiceless in the telling of their own stories' (ibid, p165). Although this research has not fully provided a voice which makes the views of the participants known to policy makers, through my dialogue with senior managers at the first urban college, it has provided a bridge between education deliverers and education receivers, and it has given the participants a vehicle (myself) through which they can make their feelings known. Furthermore it has given the participants 'voice' inasmuch as they have been able to share their feelings with an education professional willing to act as a conduit for their views and a receptive audience to their opinions.

2.4 Chapter Summary

This has been a personal chapter. Throughout this thesis and this chapter in particular I have constantly 'struggle(d) to figure out how to present the author's self while simultaneously writing the respondents' accounts and representing their selves' (Hertz, 1997, pxii). This remains a dilemma I am not certain that I have entirely addressed. While not giving the reader my life story, I have shared information that I think will be useful to the reader when reading this thesis. I have given information about my family structure, my working life and my intentions and hopes for this research. In doing so I have given the reader signposts into my world, so that readers can use these to help them in their reading and consideration of the research findings. I have tried to produce a thesis which is 'not only intellectually produced, but also emotionally engaging' (Liamputtong, 2007, p182). I am fully aware that my choices on 'how to write about the participants, about (myself) and about the cultural context of (my)

study will lead to how these are perceived and reacted to by readers, policy makers and the service providers' (ibid, p184).

For some readers the personal context will provide the touchstone which makes this research *real* and *felt*. Others, however, may be alienated by this approach. I have considered the methodological significance of this decision and I am aware that some claim

> *silent authorship comes to mark mature scholarship. The proper voice is no voice at all ... the "natives" speak for themselves, normatively, in postmodern ethnography.*

> Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997, P194

I have decided this is a risk I am prepared to take, for I believe the personal context provides a richness to this thesis and increases its relevance. A full discussion of this and other issues is provided in Chapter 5, *Research Methodology, Section 5.3.1, Ethical Issues*. While I have largely adhered to a traditional academic approach, in places I have attempted to use a more personal style in my attempt to 'bring to the fore the many silent voices of our research participants, the Others, for whom we attempt to provide a better world in our research agenda' (Liamputtong, 2007, p187).

Finally I would like to endorse the view of Charmaz and Mitchell, who state that:

> *Ethnographers(are) committed to the vocation of using all (they) can of our imperfect human capacities to experience and communicate something of others' lives ... (They) do not pretend that (their) stories report autonomous truths, but neither do (they) share the cynic's nihilism that ethnography is a biased irrelevancy. (They) hold a modest faith in middle ground.*

> 1997, p194

While fully acknowledging the imperfection of my inquiry and accepting that it remains a work in progress, I assert that it does make a contribution to this field, and the work I have completed with the research participants in two FE colleges adds to existing evidence and gives further insights to the lives of Black males journeys and the choices they make as they navigate the education system.

CHAPTER THREE – LOCATING THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

I will use this chapter to describe the context for my inquiry and to provide an overview of the FE sector. My aim is to clarify:

- the structural location of FE in relation to secondary and higher education;
- the geographical location and individual circumstances of the two further education colleges used in this research;
- the personal circumstances of the research participants, through providing a collective portrait of the students who took part in the study.

My purpose in providing this information is to supply the reader with sufficient detail so that they may have a clear understanding of the situation and circumstances in which I conducted my research and will help to promote an in-depth appreciation of the findings and implications for this research.

I will do this in three ways. Firstly I will provide a description of the FE sector, indicating how it forms part of mainstream state-provided education and its relationship with secondary and higher education. Secondly, without compromising the anonymity of the research colleges, I will provide an indication of the geographical location of the two colleges and I will give a description of the principal features of these two colleges in terms of size, participating populations and courses offered. Finally, again preserving participant anonymity, I will give some brief biographical details of the research participants. The reader will then be able to use this information to assist them in making sense of the research findings and the significance of these findings for the two participating colleges, the research participants themselves and the potential wider implications for this research.

3.1 The Structural Location of FE

When describing the structural location of FE I mean the position of FE relative to secondary and higher education. In the first part of this section I will describe the historical development of the FE sector, for this has been significant in creating the sector as we know it today. In the second part, I will describe the principal functions of the sector, although it needs to be appreciated that many of these functions remain contested and are not universally agreed or accepted by all groups who have an interest in the sector.

3.1.1 The Historical Origins of FE

FE forms part of state education in the UK. However, it has its own unique character and is distinct and different from secondary and higher education. These differences are discussed in section *4.2 The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and Further Education Sectors; 6.1 The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges; 6.2 The College Curriculum* and *6.7 The Difference Between College and School*. To a degree, this difference arises from the historical background of FE and the way that FE colleges came into existence. While FE is now a recognised part of the education provision in the UK, it is worth remembering this was not always the case and FE 'did not enter the educational lexicon until it was used to refer to post-school provision in section 41 of the 1944 Education Act' (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p6).

Hall states that 'most further education colleges have grown from either the former mechanics' institutes or technical schools' (1994, p2). Mechanics' Institutes were independent organisations which had two principal objectives; to provide technical education to working adult males, in the belief that a better educated adult workforce would be more efficient and effective in completing their working duties, and secondly to promote 'appropriate' social attitudes among the working population (Green and Lucas 2000; Hall, 1994). The first Mechanics' Institute opened in Edinburgh in 1821, and they became so popular with workers employed in the new and developing industrial occupations, that by the 'mid-nineteenth century there were 610 Institutes with a membership of more than half a million' (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p7) across the country. It is important to recognise that these Institutes, although welcomed and embraced by the new, emergent 'middle' classes of skilled industrial workers and artisans, were sometimes derided by those employed in traditional working class manual and unskilled occupations, who viewed them as 'middle-class organisations dedicated to counteracting the supposedly radicalising effects of working-class self-education' (Green and Lucas, 2000, p11). As voluntary non-governmental organisations, the Mechanics' Institutes were in full control of the curriculum they offered to participants. The 'voluntary and part-time character' (ibid) of the Mechanics' Institutes, meant that *all* those who attended did so of their own volition.

The principal dual aims of the Institutes, of providing an extended technical education to working men and promoting desirable social attitudes, were partly created by the original sponsors of the Institutes. As independent organisations, the Mechanics' Institutes did not

receive any funding from central government. In itself, the absence of government funding is not noteworthy, as it was only with the 1880 Elementary Education Act that education became free and compulsory for children up to 10. As such, the older population who attended the Institutes would not have benefited from the funding released through the 1880's Act. Consequently the Institutes were obliged to obtain support from other sources, and they received support from both industry that wanted an efficient, skilled workforce and prominent philanthropists, who were concerned with providing working men with an alternative to gambling and spending their time and money in public houses, believing that education would help to counter the twin sins of 'immorality and alcoholism' (Fieldhouse, 1998, p 27) among the working classes.

Although not polar opposites, there is a dichotomous tension between these two funding sources: for the industrialists the motivation to provide funds would appear to be directly linked to the needs of business while the philanthropists were motivated by the opportunity to improve the moral character of workers. Thus in one establishment two diverse viewpoints were brought together: the idea of moral self-improvement advocated by well meaning philanthropists and the skill-based needs of industry promoted by commerce. Indeed such was the separation between these two approaches that Fieldhouse suggests 'the purposes or functions of the Mechanics' Institutes were, or were at least perceived to be, varied and sometimes contradictory' (1998, p27). Indeed, radical working class educators were scornful of the Mechanics' Institutes, viewing them as an instrument of social control.

Until the end of the nineteenth century the government adopted a minimal intervention approach to the development of industry-based skills, allowing technical education for workers to evolve in an unregulated and voluntary manner. It was not until nearly the start of the twentieth century that the government assumed a co-ordinating role in the development of the new technical skills needed by industry, which had up until that point been seen as 'a low priority for the government' (Lucas, 2004, p9) of the day. However, when it appeared that Britain's status as a leading industrial nation might be threatened by lack of central control (Hyland and Merrill, 2003), the government intervened with the passing of the 1889 Technical Instruction Act and the 1890 Local Taxation Act which 'provided public funding for technical education and (this) led to the creation of a range of technical colleges' (Lucas, 2004, p9). It was these technical colleges which continued the tradition of industrial training for working men established by the Mechanics' Institutes.

The lower priority accorded to technical education continued into the twentieth century with primary and secondary schooling receiving greater attention than the recently established technical colleges, and it only 'became possible for the government to build the present FE system' (Lucas, 2004, p13) we are now familiar with once the 1944 Education Act had been passed. This Act enabled the creation of technical secondary schools to provide vocational education to young people and further obliged Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to:

establish and maintain county colleges, which provided school leavers with vocational, physical and practical training, thus reinforcing the vocational tradition of technical colleges.

Lucas, 2004, p14

The technical secondary schools created by this Act, like the Mechanics' Institutes before them, were set up to meet the needs of industry by providing a practical specialist education to facilitate entry to work for young people, and as such they were intended to have a strong vocational emphasis. However, in reality very few of these schools were established as this part of the Act was never fully implemented and they experienced limited success, principally as a result of their marginal position, although their work-based vocational ethos helped to influence the FE colleges that were to follow them. However, the technical colleges also created by the 1944 Act, now more prominently under central government control and in receipt of greater funding, were to evolve through a series of further Acts and interventions (for example, the 1956 White Paper on Technical Education, The 1961 White Paper on Training Opportunities, The 1964 Industrial Training Act and The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act) to become the FE colleges we know today.

From its very beginnings it can be seen that FE was, and continues to be influenced by the needs of industry and meeting the needs of employers. The need to be industry responsive has helped to produce the strong vocational nature apparent in many FE colleges today. The second broader aim of education for personal development, while perhaps not given the same priority as training for industry still remains part of the FE offer and 'they provide a second chance for people who have been failed by or who have dropped out of the system' (Foster, 2005, p5).

I have used the section to attempt the difficult task of providing a summary of the history and evolution of FE. Many of the features apparent in FE today can be traced back to its

historical origins – its elective participation, the self-help ethos and its close links with industry were also features of the Mechanics' Institutes. Echoes of its connections with technical schools are evident in the strong ties that many colleges have with local industry. FE has changed from being an eclectic assortment of self-help and training organisations, thrown together in an uncertain association, to being firmly controlled by central government and tasked with, among other responsibilities, providing the training needed for modern industry which is apparent in the strong vocational influences evident in the college curriculum. Yet something of the initial social agenda of self-improvement still remains, and those 'who have not had the opportunity to participate fully in education and training' (ibid) return to FE to re-embark on their education journey. Indeed, for these learners, FE provides the opportunity 'to go forward with learning' (Stephen Fry in Foster, 2005, p7) and to start to build their own success. Whether FE Colleges will be able to maintain this commitment to personal self-improvement is uncertain, as recent governments appear not to define students as learners beginning or continuing an education journey, but solely as potential economic units capable of making a contribution to the country's economic welfare.

Thus in many ways FE, like the early Mechanics' Institutes before them still retains a somewhat schizophrenic personality, split between different agendas and responding to different pressures and trying to balance all of these in an uneasy and sometimes difficult alliance. The FE sector today has not resolved this complicated conundrum and continues to struggle to try and locate a certain identity with a defined mission. Indeed it could be that FE's greatest strength, remains its most significant weakness, a feature which is succinctly summarised by Foster who writes:

> *FE colleges are striking in their heterogeneity. They deliver in a wide variety of settings and the range of learning opportunities they present is extraordinary. Some see this variety as a strength, but there is another view that reflects a lack of clarity about key purposes and an inefficient dilution of focus and effort.*

2005, p8

3.1.2 The Current Structural Position of FE

It is easy to provide a simplistic definition of the structural location of the FE sector. It is 'somewhere between the compulsory school sector and industry and higher education' (Frankel and Reeves, 1996, p6). To a degree this perception of the sector still exists,

however, this very basic description hides the real complexity of the sector and certainly gives no indication of the ongoing turbulence and changes experienced by FE in recent years. Indeed, now more than ever, describing where FE 'fits' relative to secondary and higher education (HE) is a difficult and challenging task which has been made even more difficult by the government's public intention that much more undergraduate provision, such as foundation degrees, should be and needs to be delivered by FE colleges.

Since the 1990s FE colleges have been encouraged to expand and have become a key part of successive government strategies for 'achieving higher levels of skills and qualifications' (Lucas, 2004, p29) across the nation. Part of this expansion has been the introduction of the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) and the HE in FE initiative.

The IFP was introduced into schools and colleges in 2002 to provide 'vocational learning for 14 to 16 year olds' (Ofsted, 2005, p1) who would benefit from being in a different learning environment. To achieve this secondary schools entered into partnerships with FE colleges and work-based learning providers who were able to provide the 'more diverse curriculum' (Ofsted, 2005, p2) and vocational learning opportunities identified as appropriate for some young people. Under this provision young people were able to attend FE colleges or other providers for part of the week to study 'National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or other vocational qualifications' (ibid) while still enrolled at school. These have included such courses as hair and beauty, motor vehicle maintenance and construction. Evaluations of the IFP programme have indicated that early cohorts of learners who have participated in the provision had positively benefited from the experience, generally making better progress than similar students who did not take part in the programme and 'overall, students in the IFP cohort gained more points than might have been expected given their prior attainment and other background characteristics' (Golden, O'Donnell, Benton and Rudd, 2005, p35). Indeed, such has been the success of the IFP that is has expanded each year from its introduction and many more young people are now participating in learning opportunities at FE colleges. In view of this success it is highly likely that this provision will continue and more young people will complete part of their education in an FE environment.

In a similar fashion, following recommendations of the Dearing Report in 1997, the government appeared to adopt Dearing's recommendation to widen participation in HE and introduced two-year work focussed foundation degrees. Since this time, consistent with the government's aim to deliver more undergraduate programmes through FE, there has been an

unprecedented expansion of the number of students studying HE-level courses through colleges. FE colleges have responded to these new demands and have developed new vocational programmes and other HE level courses to meet this challenge. In 2004 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reported that there was 'much to celebrate in the achievements of FECs as they continue(d) to develop their HE provision' and there was 'much good practice' (QAA online, 2004, summary point 1) in colleges. In 2003 there were 162 colleges directly funded by HEFCE for HE programmes, providing such diverse courses as medicine, linguistics and performing arts at HNC/D, foundation degree, diploma, BA and MSc level, targeted at learners who wanted an HE experience, but for whom traditional attendance at a university was unsuitable.

FE has not stood still and despite having a relatively 'low profile on the national stage' (Foster, 2005, p8), it has continued to grow, change and evolve. The simplistic portrayal of FE being the 'bit in the middle' provided at the start of this section no longer applies, and although the following account provided by Lucas is now some six years old, it remains an accurate depiction of the sector, which can be described as being:

> *caught half-way between full-time students and part-time students. Furthermore they offer vocational and academic courses and provide programmes such as HNDs, as well as those geared to adults needing basic skills and those wishing to gain access to higher education. In other words FE colleges can be seen as both preparatory and lifelong learning institutions, as institutions contributing to national training targets, and as organisations responsive to local needs. It is this legacy of diversity and lack of a clear strategic mission that distinguishes the FE sector so clearly from schools and universities.*

> 2004, p39

3.1.3 The Primary Function of FE Colleges

The principal function of FE colleges remains, to a degree, among FE tutors and academics, an issue of debate. This situation has been compounded by successive governments' different, and sometimes conflicting, views of the sector's primary function. A vision which has not always clearly and unequivocally been communicated to those that work within the sector. FE only became formally recognised with the 1944 Education Act, which described it as all 'full-time and part-time education for persons over compulsory school age' tasked with

providing 'full and part-time general education and vocational training as well as (non-vocational) social and recreational education provision' (Frankel and Reeves, 1996, p7). It is important to remember that in 1944 pupils could leave schools at 14 and any additional learning excluding 'post-compulsory-school age secondary-school education, teacher training and university education' (ibid) could therefore be considered to be 'further education'. Somewhat confusingly, although not controlled by the government of the day, work-based training delivered by employers on their premises, also fitted this definition and there was no clear distinction between employer based training and training provided by FE colleges.

In 1944, the primary purpose of FE was not entirely clear, and although it was suggested that FE might play a principal role in delivering a 'strong work based learning route' (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p10), lack of central support prevented this from happening. However, through an ad-hoc evolutionary process the function of FE began to become clearer and, over time:

> *employers were asked to co-operate with the new colleges. This approach led to the growing occupational training role of 'technical colleges' which gradually became institutions for 'day release' vocational education of the employed or those serving apprenticeships.*

> Green and Lucas, 2000, p17

In this way FE colleges carried on the work-based agenda of the technical schools and county colleges to become focus centres for delivering training tailored to meet the needs of industry. Colleges continued to respond to the needs of industry 'reaching a high-point of work-relatedness in the late 1960s and early 1970s' (ibid, p18). However, during the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s colleges started to consider the needs of a broader range of clients and were:

> *required to respond to the needs of new types of learners including, notably, adults and school leavers who previously would have directly entered the labour market. Colleges increasingly saw themselves as 'responsive' institutions that not only served the needs of local employers but also the needs of individuals in the wider community, catering for a more diverse student population with a mission of offering a second chance to 16-19 year olds and adults to learn and achieve.*

> Lucas, 2004, p19

As the FE target audience grew and diversified it became evident there was little to no clear sense of purpose for colleges, and in an attempt to 'cater for everyone, 16-19 year olds, both academic and vocational, adult returners, access students, HE students, those with special needs and those not included anywhere else' (Green and Lucas, 2000, p35) colleges had failed to develop a clear strategic direction. As this situation became more apparent, the government intervened to try and define the purpose of colleges, and 'by the end of the 1980s the issue ... of strategic planning was beginning to be discussed' (Lucas, 2004, p22) to enable colleges to grow and move forward in a planned fashion.

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act enabled colleges to become 'corporate institutions completely independent of local authority control with governing bodies dominated by representatives from business and industry' (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p14). In this new era colleges were no longer under the strategic direction of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and became the responsibility of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which were later to be replaced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In 2000, under this new regime there was a switch in emphasis for colleges and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), through the LSC tasked colleges:

- *to provide higher and improving standards of education for 16-19 year olds. Ensuring increased participation and achievement on broad and balanced programmes of study;*
- *to play the leading role in providing the skills the economy needs at craft, technician and equivalent levels through initial technical and vocational education for young people and skills upgrading or re-training for adults;*
- *to widen participation in learning, enabling adults to acquire the basic skills they need for employability, effective citizenship and enjoyment of learning;*
- *to provide a ladder of opportunity to higher education, with a key focus on foundation degrees, built on partnerships with higher education institutions, and with Learndirect to share and make widely available learning resources.*

Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p19

Although training for employment was still very important, it appears there was a greater emphasis on increasing participation and reaching out to the community. However, when the

provision of colleges was reviewed in 2005, one of these aims surfaced as paramount – to ensure that:

> *the FE college of the future must be absolutely clear about its primary purpose: to improve employability and skills in its local area contributing to economic growth and social cohesion.*

> Foster, 2005, p3

In this statement Foster makes it clear that in current times the principal work of colleges is to provide a skills based education suitable to meet the needs of industry and employers. While the Mechanics' Institutes and Technical Colleges before them also had a similar aim, it is important to remember that they retained a kind of liberal model of education, providing opportunities for self improvement and it is only the current genesis of FE that appears to have distanced itself so openly from the liberal model of education.

3.2 Profile of the Two Research Colleges

Both of the colleges I used in this study were located in a large conurbation in the East Midlands. Employment in the area had changed over time, as the traditional industries of production and manufacturing had declined, to be replaced by newer leisure and retail industries, as the principal employers of the region. The first urban college was located approximately two miles from the city centre in a relatively prosperous area, with high levels of employment and a large percentage of owner-occupied homes. The second college was some six miles away from the city centre on the outskirts of the city in a marginally less affluent suburban area, although still enjoying good rates of employment and high levels of home ownership. Both colleges were in largely white neighbourhoods. However, the proximity of the first urban college to the city centre meant that it attracted a much more ethnically mixed population than the second college, and many Black and minority ethnic (BME) students were willing to make the short bus journey from their homes close to the city centre to attend the first college. The same was not true of the second suburban college, which was much further away from the areas where the BME populations were concentrated, and this college principally attracted students from its immediate neighbourhood and consequently had a much smaller population of BME students.

The colleges in the inquiry were medium sized general further education colleges (GFECs) attended by approximately 20,000 students, located on multiple sites across the conurbation.

Each college provided a range of further, higher and vocational education courses for learners aged 14 upwards, as well as a choice of leisure and recreation programmes. In addition to the full and part-time courses available during the day, evening and at weekends, both colleges provided opportunities for flexi-, distance and on-line learning. Although both full and part-time learners took part in this inquiry, all the participants completed their studies on a single college site, and may not have been aware of the full range of opportunities provided by each of the colleges. The main campuses where the participants studied were older, 1960s style buildings, although in recent years some redevelopment and modernisation had taken place on these sites. Neither college nor their campuses had a reputation for violence or disruption, although they both employed security staff who maintained a visible profile, and learners often had their identity checked when they entered college premises.

Both colleges prided themselves not only on the extensive range of courses they offered and the quality teaching provided (as verified by external inspection reports), but also on the high level of student support they believed that they were able to offer to students. This support included personal tutor support, professional development coaching, welfare advice and personal counselling. The colleges also had extensive support mechanisms for students with additional learning needs, although it is interesting to note that despite having a growing population of BME students, neither college had apparently considered providing specified support for this group.

3.3 Profile of the Research Participants

The 29 males who engaged with this study had already identified themselves as Black (see section *4.1.1 Black*,), although within a formal census description, many of the participants would have been more readily described as mixed race, as they had one Black parent and one white parent. The participants ranged in age from 16 to 47 although all but three of the learners were under 25, with only the three older learners living independently in their own accommodation. All other participants lived at home in a family unit. For most of the participants 'family' comprised of a single parent (often the mother) and other siblings. The circumstances and time of their father's departure was not explored in this research nor did the participants volunteer information regarding their father's absence. While most of the participants declined to indicate which social class they believed they belonged to, the fact that only the three older participants did not receive the Educational Maintenance Allowance

(EMA) or the Adult Learner's Grant (ALG), gives an indication of the level of family income among the participants.

Prior to beginning their study at college the participants had previously attended a number of different establishments. Seven of the participants had been at college the previous year on a lower level programme, two had been in full-time employment, and one had been on a supported education programme co-ordinated by a day centre (this participant indicated that he had ongoing issues with mental health concerns), while the remaining 19 had transferred straight from secondary school. Of those transferring from secondary schools, one of the participants indicated that as a consequence of permanent exclusions he had attended two different secondary schools and one participant, after being excluded from his second secondary school, had been placed on an 'education otherwise' programme, where he had been exited early from school to allow him to attend college on a full-time basis. Four other participants while not being permanently excluded from their schools, indicated they had been given fixed term exclusions, but had been allowed to return to school at the end of the exclusion.

The learners who took part in this inquiry were studying a variety of options including an individualised learning programme, sports, computing, art, business and music technology courses. They were studying these programmes at a range of levels from entry through to advanced level. While completing their studies at college, 17 of the group had part-time jobs working in shops, restaurants or leisure centres. Although for some of the learners their part-time employment was in an area of personal interest and was related to their chosen career, most of the participants worked to provide an extra source of income. All of the participants had ambitions to continue their studies beyond their current course to complete another programme at college or to progress onto higher education.

3.4 Chapter Summary

All research has to happen in a context and the context of the research will shape, mould and influence the investigation that takes place. The context for the research will also provide significant reference points which the reader should be made aware of, for without such information the reader would not be in a position to make sense of the research itself and the subsequent findings. Failure to provide this information would be to present a partial picture, an edited version of the situation, and would present serious ethical issues that could undermine the relevance and value of the research.

In the same way as I used the last chapter to describe my personal position in relation to the inquiry, I have used this chapter, to provide details about the structural location of the FE sector, the two research colleges I used for this investigation, and the participants who took part in the research. I have taken the decision to share some biographical information of the research participants, so the reader could have a fuller understanding of the participants' personal circumstances. However, in sharing this information I have taken great care not to compromise the anonymity of the participants, and have addressed this issue by providing a group profile, rather than individual pen pictures. Similarly, I also felt it necessary to apprise the reader of details relating to the two research colleges. I have done this by providing only essential information to give a representation of the colleges, once again ensuring the anonymity of the colleges was protected.

This information is needed to support reading this thesis, for it provides signposts into the world where the inquiry was located and helps to the reader to gain a greater understanding of the research environment. It gives the reader a map and a compass to help them find their way through the inquiry and to navigate and make sense of the research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: LITERATURE REVIEW

The position of Black males within the statutory education sector in the UK both historically and currently has generated and continues to generate much interest in the Black community, government and academic circles, and a number of published academic projects and government reports have considered this issue (for example, Rampton, 1981; Swann, 1985; Eggleston, 1986; Channer, 1995; London Development Agency, 2004). Although these first three reports are now many years old, they are significant to this research as they represent the first time the national government formally recognised there was an issue in relation to the academic attainment of, as they were then called, 'Afro-Caribbean' students. Much of this research has concentrated on statutory education and the academic achievement of students in the primary and secondary sectors has been the main focus. I will be using literature that considers the position in both the primary and secondary phases, Higher Education, and where available the FE sector (for example Sewell, 1997; Blair, 2001; Allen, 2006). However, my interest extends beyond this narrow framework, defined solely in terms of academic achievement, and I also wish to explore how African-Caribbean students receive, perceive and experience education while in the FE sector. Less literature, for both the statutory sector and FE, is available that considers the wider social experience of Black males in education, and for this reason I will be drawing on literature from both the United Kingdom and the United States, across all phases of education. Although I recognise that the experience of Black males in the US and the UK are not identical, both groups share a common experience of being a minority identified by race, and will have knowledge and experience of issues associated with this. In this way I will present a more holistic picture of the educational experience of this group which not only considers their academic positioning and attainment, but also examines their social positioning, and how this group 'feels about' and responds to the education they receive.

I will use this chapter to discuss the organisational and curriculum arrangements of the pre- and post -16 sectors in the UK. I will show how FE differs significantly from secondary education not only in terms of taught curriculum content and the way in which this curriculum is usually delivered, but also in terms of cultural variations between these two sectors.   Much of the research to date has been about *where* African-Caribbean students are positioned academically and *how* this group experiences education. I will revisit both of these questions in this chapter to further explore differences between the secondary and FE sectors. My reading of the literature suggests there is evidence that African-Caribbean students routinely fail in, and are

failed by, the UK secondary sector. Finally in this chapter I will consider the different presentations and representations of Black males in secondary education and further education sectors and the significance of these presentations.   The research from the secondary sector is significant within the context of this research as it provides a point of comparison to another, different, but related sector, and provides evidence of another set of educational experiences.

There are two other important questions that need to be examined in this context - *why* this group are in this position and *how* the position of endemic underachievement can be addressed beyond the deficit model of 'quick fixes' and 'bolt on' strategies to raise attainment. I will consider these later in this thesis in Chapter 8*, Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations*. I will further use this chapter to present evidence from my literature review that suggests Black males have a different experience within the secondary and FE sectors. Later in this chapter I will argue that this difference is created, in part, because secondary education is too narrow in its method of delivery with a focus on teaching groups and content rather than teaching individuals, and additionally that secondary education is teacher and curriculum centred rather than student centred. Although it could be suggested that FE has many similarities with the secondary sector with its comparable curriculum, methods of delivery and staffing structures and could therefore be expected to produce a similar experience for Black males, the actual experience of the research participants' described in Chapter 6, *Research Findings*, appears to challenge this view. Despite having a teacher-centred, curriculum driven approach, FE appears to have managed its provision in a different way, which has helped to provide a far more positive learning experience for many Black male students.

4.1. Important Definitions

Before moving on to review the literature more fully, it is important to establish key definitions at this point. The three key terms I need to explain at this point are my understanding of the word Black, and my understanding of the terms secondary education and FE.

4.1.1   Black

Before offering my definition of Black, I would like to briefly explore the concept of race, because it is intrinsically linked to notions of identity and ethnicity. Gillborn frames the debate in the following way:

'Race' is a word we all recognise. Part of the English language for hundreds of years, the term has been the subject of heated political debate for more than a century. And yet for all the controversy, it is still the case that people routinely (often unthinkingly) categorise themselves and others according to 'racial' criteria.

Gillborn, 1995, p1

Like the concept itself, ideas regarding race are fluid and subject to changing fashions and opinions of the times. Initially race was viewed as a fixed biological feature with various immutable, inherited characteristics, such as intelligence and physical ability, ascribed to different groups according to their race. Although 'arguments about fixed genetic differences and the innate superiority of certain human "races" have been widely discredited' (ibid, p3), such ideas are capable of 'still capturing the popular imagination even now' (Mirza, 2009, p43) and continue to exert an influence on 'our thinking about race' (ibid). However, currently rather than being fixed by genetics, race is now considered to be 'a system of socially constructed and enforced categories, constantly recreated and modified through human interaction' (Gillborn, 1995, p3), and while there may be no scientific basis for race, the impact of the 'physical, phenotypical, external, visible difference' (Mirza, 2009, p43) continues to be experienced, felt and live by Black people in Britain today. Indeed as recently as 2007, James Watson who together with Francis Crick famously unravelled the DNA double helix, reignited the race debate in an interview for the Sunday Times, where he 'translated the careful wording of his book into language of the street. People expect everyone to be equal, he claimed, but "people who have to deal with Black employees find this not so" ' (Malik, 2008, p2) suggesting a potential inferiority or some other difficulty of Black people.

Within the context of this research it has been important to establish a clear definition of who could be considered to be Black and thus eligible to participate in my research. I needed a definition which acknowledged the impact of visibility and recognised 'the enduring nature (of visible recognition) as a source of stigma' (Mendoza-Denton and Downey, 2002, p898). Initially I chose to adopt Nehusi and Gosling's definition of Black, which describes Black people as 'descendents of Afrika, who were either born in the UK of parents arriving directly from Afrika or from the Caribbean or who themselves arrived in the UK directly from one of these two geographical locations' (Nehusi and Gosling, 2001, p1). While this definition

adequately acknowledges historical attachments and to some degree visibility, the issue of being born of such parents should be challenged, as there are many people within the UK who could be referred to as Black and indeed would choose to describe themselves in this way without this level of attachment to either Africa or the Caribbean. It was important to find a way of accommodating the views of those who saw themselves as Black and would wish to be classified in this way. As it stands Nehusi and Gosling's (2001) definition could be described as classification by imposition rather than classification by self-selection and outdated, in that if fails to acknowledge the politicisation of being Black in Britain as well as the changing populations who could, and do, justifiably describe themselves as Black.

A further broader definition was therefore required which both acknowledged and accepted issues of visibility while at the same time allowing self-classification. The definition was consequently revised to include both external classification by others and to reflect a personal individual alignment. In relation to visibility Black, therefore meant: would most ordinary people consider the person they saw to be Black? Moreover, would those same ordinary people, consider this information in any future opinion they may form or future action they may take? For it is these opinions and actions which are significant in producing the experience of the research group within the FE sector. It was also important that the group themselves identified themselves as Black as this too would be significant in shaping their perceptions, responses and interpretations of situations for, according to Mendoza-Denton and Downey:

> *Anxious expectations of rejection based on such group membership can strain social relationships and undermine people's confidence in the institution's fairness and legitimacy, diminishing the motivation to persist in the pursuit of valued personal goals*
>
> 2002, p896

Rather than using Black in a homogenous classification, my definition of Black has three principal features which go beyond geographical attachment. My final determination of Black, can be described in the following way:

- ➢ Would a 'reasonable' person in the street identify the person they saw as a Black person?
- ➢ Did the research participants see themselves as Black?

➢ And finally, as well as personally identifying themselves as Black, did they identify with and align themselves to this group?

It is this three-fold definition which has been used in this study to describe Black students for it accommodates issues of visibility, identity construction and individual personal alignment.

4.1.2 Secondary Education

Although both UK and US literature has been used in this study the term 'secondary education' is used to describe education from the ages of 11 to 16, as this encompasses the compulsory secondary schooling within the UK. It is acknowledged that students can study in schools beyond the age of 16 in the UK, but such sixth forms are not considered within the scope of this research. Effectively this age definition encompasses middle and high schools in the United States, and although these cannot be considered a direct comparison to the UK education system, there is sufficient overlap for comparisons to be made between the two systems.

4.1.3 FE

The final definition to be clarified here is FE. In this study this will mean general further education colleges (GFECs) that offer a broad range of both academic and vocational education packages to students over the age of 16. Within the context of this study it is important not to confuse FE with the more generic Adult Education sector. Adult Education is an umbrella term used to describe other adult education and training and includes a variety of government funded organisations, voluntary organisations, work based, charitable and religious groups providing leisure, academic, recreational and vocational provision (Kelly, 1992; Rowntree and Binns 1985). The concern of this study is far more tightly defined and will only consider publicly funded colleges that provide training and leisure for students over the age of 16. A fuller discussion of the two colleges used in this research is provided in *3.2 Profile of the Two Research Colleges*.

4.2. The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and FE Sectors

The 1944 Education Act established the system of education that we recognise today, and education was organised 'into three progressive stages: primary, secondary and further education' (Fieldhouse, 1998, p58). The same Act also placed a duty on local authorities to 'provide secondary education for all their children over eleven' (Rubenstein and Simon, 1973, p35). However, although this Act established an age related, staged education system, compulsory education only applied to the primary and secondary sectors. Successive governments have shown a sustained interest in compulsory education since 1944, so that in 1998 through the Education Reform Act the 'government attempted to assert direct control over the school curriculum' (Ball, 1994, p33) by further defining the business of secondary schools, and introducing a national curriculum which stipulated what subjects were to be taught in secondary schools. Although there has been a redefinition of these requirements by government following criticisms that the original national curriculum was 'too rigid to cope with the full ability range' (Times Educational Supplement, 1995, online), eventually resulting in the publication of the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (2005) which enabled a more flexible approach to the delivery of the curriculum, maintained secondary schools are still obliged to deliver a core curriculum of mathematics, English and science to all students up to the age of 16.

In spite of these revisions and a proclaimed government intention to loosen the National Curriculum and provide opportunities for increased flexibility, the curriculum in secondary schools is still defined *by subject*, which are clearly stated for both key stage 3 (for 11-14 year olds) and key stage 4 (for 14-16 year olds), so dictating what is taught in schools and continuing the government's determination 'to put "real" knowledge back into school' (Ball, 1994, p33). Even the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) revised national curriculum, launched in September 2008 maintained this subject organisation, and in many respects was barely indistinguishable from the original 1998 national curriculum, maintaining its emphasis on the need to 'establish national standards for the performance of pupils' (QCA, 2007, p7) in schools. However, perhaps indicating a lower level of government interest, less attention has been paid to FE in both the 1944 and the 1998 Acts, and it was not until 1992 with the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act which 'created a newly defined further education sector' (Fieldhouse, 1998, p75) that FE gained a higher profile.

In contrast to secondary education, FE has been and is, an elective educational opportunity which individuals make a conscious decision to opt into. Indeed, the voluntary nature of FE was enshrined in the 1944 Education Act which did not 'insist that LEAs provide, only that they secure adequate provision' (Fieldhouse, 1998, p103) for the post-16 population. Although the remit of FE colleges was made clearer in the 1992 Act, it still remained an optional provision where individuals where able to decide what subjects they studied. Indeed, the 2005 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper, although it clarified a Government ambition to 'encourage a culture of staying on and achieving worthwhile qualifications until19' (14-19 Education and Skills White Paper, 2005, p82), again this was not a compulsory element of the requirements, and FE is one of many providers who could support this goal. As a consequence of this difference, the FE sector has always been 'customer orientated', providing subjects and courses to meet demand. This fundamental difference, optional and choice driven as opposed to compulsory and prescriptive, has in part helped to create the cultural differences that exist between the secondary school and FE sectors. However, the elective customer driven culture of FE may soon change as the Government has now decided to raise the school leaving age to 18, so that by 2015 all 18 year olds will either be in school, or in work related training or in FE (Browne and Webster, 2007).

As the focus of this study is the experience of Black males within FE, with comparisons drawn to the secondary sector as appropriate, I do not intend to describe the secondary education sector in any great detail, save to provide such information as is relevant to the context of this study.

Secondary schools are generally larger than primary schools, have an extended school day, and usually teach subjects separately in accordance with the requirements of the national curriculum, with specialist staff responsible for delivery of each subject (DfEE, 2000). This organisation and delivery of knowledge as subjects defined by the national curriculum produces one of the most significant features of secondary school organisation. The emphasis on subject knowledge creates a curriculum which is delivered by subject 'experts'. Consequently at secondary school pupils can expect to see 'many more teachers' (DfEE, 2000, p1) in a single day and will see even more teachers over the course of the week as they participate in a prescribed curriculum which focuses on the accumulation of knowledge and does not necessarily take direct account of students' views. Although some schools deliver the curriculum through a topic web approach, many schools choose to deliver the curriculum

through discrete separate subjects.   The curriculum organisation thus views students in a disaggregated way, through sequential single curriculum lenses, that delivers compartmentalised information and predominantly sees students as having a single curriculum function. In this organisation secondary schools become sites of constant transformation and change for students. One of the consequences of this continual change, is a reduction in contact time with individual staff members and that physical (and potentially emotional) distance between staff and students increases, as students move from room to room to study different subjects.

The position that exists in secondary schools can be contrasted with the position in FE. Although under the 1992 Act, provision in FE is now more tightly controlled, the curriculum of FE can still be described as an elective curriculum, in that if a subject exists at all it exists because there is a direct demand from consumers. Before the FE sector was established, students exited school either directly into work, or, for a privileged few, continued into higher education. FE, originally encompassed under the unregulated Adult Education sector, began as a response to a growing demand for education beyond compulsory schooling and, as discussed in the previous chapter, has worked to retain the two-fold aims of the Mechanics' Institutes: to serve the needs of industry which required its workers to be skilled to a higher level, and to provide some recreational or leisure courses for those who wished to continue to study (Fieldhouse, 1998; Kelly, 1992). It is these two driving factors which have produced the FE curriculum. It is a curriculum driven by demand and need. This creates a key organisational difference between FE and secondary schools. In order to survive FE colleges *have* to be community, industry and most critically customer-responsive, as they are not delivering a Government dictated curriculum to a captive audience.

Thus from its very beginnings FE has been, and remains, non-compulsory responding to the needs of the market. This is another key feature of FE - *because* it is non-compulsory and *because* it has its roots in the Adult Education tradition, FE has come to view itself as a 'different offer'. It does not seek to replicate the tightly defined structures and organisation of schools, acknowledging that students do not have to attend FE, and even though young people must 'continue in education or training to the age of 17 from 2013 and to 18 from 2015' (DfE, 2011, online) they are not obliged to continue their education within FE and they may use other providers. One outcome of this different offer means FE has the opportunity to develop a different set of relationships between staff and students.   FE colleges strive to uphold the

principles of androgogy and to achieve the ideal position where contributions from the adult learner are welcomed and valued, in a 'relationship of mutual respect between teacher and learner' (Vella, 1994, p182) and the tutor 'honour(s) the learner first as an adult with years of experience' (ibid, p185). While it is recognised that not *all* tutors in *all* colleges achieve this ideal at all times, it is important to appreciate that this is a cherished principle of the FE ethos.

FE colleges, like schools, are still large and, like schools, the curriculum is still delivered on a subject basis taught by specialists. If secondary school staff can be considered to be placed in a virtual policing role, whose principal function is to pass judgement on and to control students ensuring they achieve the 'national expectations of standards of pupils achievement' (QCA, 2007, p8), then FE has sought to forge an alternative way, and has attempted to achieve Vella's vision of mutuality and respect in which staff are attentive collaborators working in partnership with valued adult learners. While this ambitious, humanistic aim may not consistently be achieved by all staff in all colleges, it remains an ideal notion of FE.

This positive relationship was noted in Ofsted's 2005 survey of FE colleges, in which students commented on:

> *friendly and supportive teachers, the safe and secure environment, the way they were treated with respect as individuals, and the support and opportunities they were provided.*
> 2005[a], p4

FE appears to seek to promote a secure environment, while simultaneously providing an environment which offers accessible support for students. Independently, in their research Bhattacharyya, Ison and Blair found that the majority of colleges were successful in providing opportunities for young Black men:

> *to develop positive relationships with tutors who are perceived to care about the progress and well-being of young people.*
> 2003, p24

These findings suggest that many staff in FE are successful in implementing relationships that are founded on mutual trust and respect and that colleges on the whole manage to minimise the distance between tutors and students.

In contrast to the positive caring environment experienced by young Black men in many FE colleges, in schools the London Development Agency found that:

> *the degree of care experienced by African-Caribbean pupils from their teachers, the quality of communication with their teachers, and levels of conflict with teachers, was all less positive for African-Caribbean boys than for boys from most other groups.*
>
> 2004, p8

While in a separate report for the BBC, one Black student noted that that 'he had been held back by a lack of support and a negative stereotype of Black schoolchildren held by some teachers' (BBC news online, May 2003). Similarly in their research Blair and Bourne note some white teachers 'had problems relating to Black students, a problem which existed whether or not Black students reacted to teachers' (1998, p85).

Although these negative examples of staff/student relationships could not be presented as the definitive experience for all Black males in all secondary schools, they are indicative of the significant difference that exists between the two sectors, and may mean that the learning environment that is prevalent in FE is more suitable to and receptive of the learning needs of Black students.

A further critical difference between schools and FE is schools generally have a consistent population of students with little annual fluctuation in student numbers. FE colleges, however, operate a system of open enrolment which can produce significant annual fluctuations in student numbers and it is common for courses to close if insufficient numbers of students enrol. FE staff therefore rely on students attending colleges to secure staff employment. Viewed in this way it could be suggested that in FE, staff and students co-exist in a symbiotic relationship each deriving mutual benefit from the other: students gain an educational benefit and staff secure continued employment.

In summary, in spite of sharing similarities with secondary schools in terms of size, delivering a disaggregated curriculum, and being sites of continual change, it appears many FE colleges work to counter the potentially negative and harmful effects of this organisation through its positive and productive staff/student relations. In spite of secondary and FE sharing much in common in terms of curriculum organisation and population size, this key difference has produced the distinct institutional culture of FE. An institutional culture, which on available evidence appears to be far more suited to the needs of Black males (Ofsted 2005; BBC 2003; London Development Agency 2004; Bhattacharyya, Ison, Blair 2003).

4.3. The Academic Location of Black Males in the Secondary and FE Sectors

The underachievement of and the discrimination against Black students, in particular the underachievement of Black males, has been well documented for the compulsory sector in the UK. As early as 1971 Coard, is his seminal report 'How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System' independently reported on the inappropriate and inaccurate assessment of Black students resulting in their disproportionate placement in Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools and lower sets and streams within mainstream education. Coard's work represented a landmark publication for the African and Caribbean communities in the UK at the time. It was written by a Black academic. This in itself was unusual for the time, as the African and Caribbean communities were more used to being told by white academics and politicians about the failures of their children, and how they as parents and carers were responsible for this failure. This document was written from the perspective of a community member - not as an academic or statistical exercise, but as 'one of the family' wishing to expose a social injustice. It therefore had immediate credibility within these communities who felt that here was a publication that was not talking *about them*, but *to them* and *with them*. Rather than merely reporting and describing a problem, Coard's report identified the education system itself as being at fault, in essence creating the underachievement of African and Caribbean children. In doing this, Coard helped to empower and mobilise Black communities, by unequivocally stating that this was not a problem of individual children or individual families, but was a matter of concern for the whole Black community in Britain. Effectively, almost single-handedly, Coard turned an individualised, local and marginalised issue into a community, national and politicised issue. Coard's report can be viewed as the vanguard for educational action to address the issue of underachievement and marginalisation

of Black students in Britain. Even though this report is now 40 years old the significance of this report remains to this day. This was the first report that discussed structural inequalities in the education system and how Black children were systematically and routinely incorrectly placed in lower ability classes or special schools. It highlighted the moral and social duty of mainstream education to recognise and confront these issues, and to provide a more just system of education for Black children.

The way in which achievement has been recorded over time is not fixed and requires further explanation. Much of the data I have assembled defines achievement as the 'traditional notion(s) of academic success (with) and emphasis on examination success' (Gillborn, 1990, p113).   Although this definition may be criticised in that it views success in very narrow terms, 'educational certification' (ibid) is one of the key ways in which colleges make choices about a young person's suitability for a course; in which employers select young people for employment; and latterly has been the measure used for judging schools and producing school league tables. The importance of obtaining certification is therefore key for young people in terms of the opportunity to remain within education; for employment prospects and for schools in terms of their league table performance. Even so, over time there have been changes in the types of tests that have been recognised as important. For this reason I have not been able to make direct, parallel comparisons of data. The data I will now present will provide an indication of the comparative level of academic achievement of Black students (both genders included) relative to their peers from 1978 to 2005.

Despite accumulating evidence being available, it would be some time before the educational mainstream fully embraced the concerns regarding achievement of young Black people first identified by Coard. The 1985 Swann Report (which was preceded by the 1981 Rampton Report) confirmed the earlier findings of Coard, and showed that West Indian students, as they were then described, were underperforming in comparison to all their peers. The table below which uses data collected by the Department for Education and Science(DES) shows the relative achievement of West Indian students from 1978-79 and 1981-82 for five Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England.

Table 1: 'O' Level and Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) Achievement

	Asians		West Indians		All Other Leavers		All Maintained School Leavers in England	
Year	78-79	81-82	78-78	81-82	78-79	81-82	78-79	81-82
No Graded Result	20%	19%	17%	19%	22%	19%	14%	11%
5 or More Higher Graded Results	17%	17%	3%	6%	16%	19%	21%	23%
Total Nos of Leavers	466	571	718	653	5,012	4,718	693,840	706,690

Source: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, 'Education for All', 1981, p114 (aka the Swann Report)

The table shows that:

> *there is no significant difference between the school leavers categories' within the five LEAs (but) the major difference between the achievements of West Indians, Asians and other leavers lies in the proportion obtaining five or more higher grades (grades A-C at 'O' level or CSE grade 1). Only 6 per cent of West Indian leavers in 1981/82 had obtained this level of qualification compared with 17 per cent of Asians and 19 per cent of all other leavers.*
> The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, 'Education for All', 1981, p114

Effectively this represents an achievement gap between West Indian students and their peers of approximately 66 per cent. The report also noted the improvement in achievement shown by West Indian students from 1978-79 to 1981-82 was 'statistically significant' when achievement rates by West Indian students doubled from 3 to 6 per cent, while achievement rates for Asians remained static, and there was only a modest 3 per cent increase for all other leavers from 16 to 19 per cent.

O levels and CSEs were withdrawn as an examination in 1988 and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was introduced. Effectively now all students were entered for the same examination and all students were assessed on the same scale. However, the benchmark recognised as a 'good' pass remained at obtaining a grade C or above. Using

information from the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) funded by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), Gillborn and Mizra presented information of achievement according to ethnicity. This study only included students in the state education system and not those who attended independent schools.

In the table below it can be seen that from 1988 to 1997 there was an 11 per cent improvement in achievement for Black students. However, with the exception of Pakistani students, this was still behind all other groups, and by 1997 Black and Pakistani students showed identical achievement levels, indicating that although Black students were achieving higher grades, their rate of improvement was not at the same level, when compared to other ethnic groups.

Table 2: Changes in GCSE Attainment by Ethnicity for England and Wales in 1988, 1995, 1997 Compared (state schools only)

Ethnic Group	Five or More Higher Grade Passes			Improvement from 1988-1997
	1988	1995	1997	
White	26%	42	44	18
Black	17	21	28	11
Indian	23	44	49	26
Pakistani	20	22	28	8
Bangladeshi	13	23	32	19

Source: Adapted from Gillborn and Mizra, 2003, p13
(original data based on YCS:Denmack at al, 2000, and DfEE)

Shortly after this, the continuing underachievement of Black students relative to their peers prompted Ofsted to observe that:

> *At secondary level, the data indicates that Black Caribbean pupils underachieve. In*
> *some cases they are the lowest performing group at GCSE level.*
> 1999, p11

This data is further supported by other regional data which mirrors this position of constant underachievement. Independent research completed by the London Development Agency in 2004, showed:

> *London Data for 2000, 2001 and 2002 indicated that African-Caribbean boys have*
> *consistently been the lowest performing group across all key stages. The achievement*

gap widened with progress through each key stage. Even where there was year on year progress, the performance of African-Caribbean boys remained significantly below that of other groups. Differences could not solely be attributed to class since working class boys from other ethnic groups such as Bangladeshi boys outperformed middle class African-Caribbean boys in 2002.
2004, p9

In more recent surveys the collection and classification of data has become more sophisticated, and there is a more detailed breakdown according to ethnicity, and aggregate figures for both genders are no longer routinely used. Additionally, although earlier data simply recorded achievement by numbers of examinations obtained, there is now recognition of the importance of obtaining a good grade in English and maths. In an 'Evaluation of Aiming High: African and Caribbean Achievement Project' detailed results of achievement by gender and ethnicity from 2003 to 2005 are presented for the 30 schools that participated in the project. In this project data tables are presented that show achievement of five or more higher grade GCSEs by ethnic group and gender for the Aiming High Schools compared to the national average, and then a further table shows achievement of five or more higher grades including English and maths. This data is particularly interesting as each school involved in the project received positive support to help them improve the attainment levels of their students.

Table 3: Percentage of Students Achieving 5 or More Higher Grade GCSEs including English and Maths by Ethnic Group and Gender (2003-2005)

		2003 %	2004 %	2005 %	% Change 2003-2005
Black African	Boys	19.1	15.1	28.1	9.0
	Girls	29.6	29.0	34.8	5.2
Black Caribbean	Boys	9.5	7.1	14.2	4.7
	Girls	15.0	16.6	25.2	10.2
Black Other	Boys	15.3	17.9	14.3	-1.0
	Girls	15.5	16.7	34.5	19.0
White/Black Caribbean	Boys	20.2	18.6	18.4	-1.8
	Girls	15.7	17.5	32.7	17.0
Indian	Boys	40.8	38.2	44.4	3.6
	Girls	46.9	53.7	63.1	16.2
White	Boys	31.9	28.0	33.4	1.5
	Girls	34.3	36.9	42.5	8.2

Source: Tikly, Haynes, Caballera, Hill, Gillborn, 2006, Table 17

The data table above shows a number of interesting features. Firstly, it can be seen that Black boys, with the notable exceptions of Black other boys and White/Black Caribbean boys in 2004, are consistently outperformed by their female counterparts. Black African and Black Caribbean boys have shown positive increases over the three year period, while achievement has declined over the same period for Black other and White/Black Caribbean boys. However, what is apparent if that all Black boys relative to both Indian and White groups have performed less well and this group, particularly Black Caribbean boys 'remain the lowest achieving group' (Tikly, Haynes, Caballera, Hill, Gillborn, 2006, p28). Indeed although there may have been a narrowing of the achievement gap for some Black students, these achievements were mainly made by female students and Black male students of all groups continue to be outperformed by the majority of their peers, even after positive intervention strategies.

The next table shows the national average of the percentage of students achieving 5 or more higher grade GCSEs between 2003 to 2005.   In this table no specific attention is paid to achievement in English and maths, instead, similar to data collected in the past the emphasis is on the number of exams achieved at the higher grade regardless of the subject studied.

Table 4: Percentage of Students Achieving 5 or More Higher Grade GCSEs by Ethnic Group and Gender (2003 to 2005)

		National Average 5 or More Higher Grades			
		2002-03 %	2003-04 %	2004-05 %	% Change 2003-2005
Black African	Boys	34.1	45.5	42.9	8.8
	Girls	46.8	61.2	53.3	6.5
Black Caribbean	Boys	25.1	27.6	33.3	8.2
	Girls	40.3	43.8	49.4	9.1
Black Other	Boys	27.2	29.0	33.7	6.5
	Girls	40.3	42.3	50.8	10.5
White/Black Caribbean	Boys	39.5	44.9	48.4	8.9
	Girls	55.1	53.6	62.1	7.0
Indian	Boys	60.3	63.3	64.8	4.5
	Girls	70.3	77.1	75.8	5.5
White	Boys	46.2	47.5	50.3	4.1
	Girls	56.7	57.5	60.2	3.5

Source: Tikly, Haynes, Caballera, Hill, Gillborn, 2006, Table 16

Although this data shows that there have been significant improvements of Black pupils gaining 5 or more good GCSEs, the data itself becomes harder to interrogate and to precisely identify where the areas of concern lie, in terms of which precise groups of Black students are underperforming. This task is further complicated by the masking effect that merging results by gender produces. However, what remains clear is 'the proportion of African-Caribbean students achieving 5 good GCSE grades is well below the national average', in spite of significant gains made where 'the proportion of African Caribbean pupils getting 5 good GCSEs jumped from 23% to 37% between 1996 and 2000' and these students continue to lag behind their peers (Baker, 2002, BBC Education online). Any gains made seem to further decrease in significance when it is recognised that overall 'attainment rates at GCSE have risen in general' (Bhattacharyya, Ison, Blair, 2003, p10) across all ethnic groups. The increases in attainment seen in this period have not been sustained and:

> *while attainment continues to rise for White, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils in 2002, it fell back for Black pupils and remained the same for Indian pupils. In 2002 approximately a third of Black pupils achieved five or more A*-C GCSEs compared to half of White pupils. In addition, of these Black pupils who achieved 5 or more GCSEs A*-C, about half achieved very high results (8 or more A*-C) compared to two-thirds of all other ethnic groups.*
> Bhattacharyya, Ison, Blair, 2003, p10

Thus both in the attainment of overall quantity of GCSEs and higher grade GCSEs, Black students are again, relatively performing less well than their counterparts. However, it is important to note that these figures are for all Black students, including girls, and as 'boys are achieving less well than girls, with girls more likely to achieve five or more GCSEs than boys' (Bhattacharyya, Ison, Blair, 2003, p11), the aggregated figure creates the impression of 'inflating' the achievement of Black boys.

The data I have presented demonstrates that the pattern of underachievement has continued to be replicated, with Black students and in particular boys, consistently achieving considerably lower levels of attainment than their peers of all races. Later data has only confirmed the earlier bleak picture regarding the educational achievement of Black children in British schools, with similar trends of academic underachievement reported for this group.

More recent data, however, indicates that Black males are no longer the lowest achieving of all groups. The most recent statistical release from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) on Key Stage 4 attainment by pupil characteristics for 2008-09, shows that 'the lowest attaining groups were Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils and Gypsy/Roma pupils' (DCSF online, 2010), although the DCSF cautioned that 'care should be taken in making comparisons due to the low number of eligible pupils from these ethnic groups' (ibid). However, where larger sample sizes were available the DCSF found that 'the lowest achieving group were Black Caribbean, Pakistani, Other Black and pupils from a Mixed White and Black Caribbean background' (ibid) so replicating data from previous times.

The situation becomes more complex when considering pupils who are in receipt of free school meals, which can be taken as an indicator of socio-economic location, where 'for White British boys, 19.0 percent achieved 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs or equivalent including English and mathematics' and 'for Black Caribbean boys 22.4 percent achieved 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs or equivalent including English and mathematics' (ibid). Although this data demonstrates Black males are now not at the very bottom of the attainment charts, they appear to be stubbornly anchored towards the lower end of achievement.

Despite significant changes to the school curriculum (for example GCSEs were first examined in 1988, and the National Curriculum was introduced in 1992) the problem of academic underachievement has, neither diminished nor disappeared since Coard first reported on this matter in 1971, and, it appears that central government changes to education have had little impact on the overall pattern of underachievement of African-Caribbean students.   The problem is not only gendered, but also unequivocally linked to being Black, and other races do not appear to experience the same level of disadvantage as African-Caribbean students. Neither does class have the same influence on achievement for the African-Caribbean community as is demonstrated by working class boys from other ethnic groups achieving at a higher level than working class (and potentially middle class) African-Caribbean boys (London Development Agency, 2004). Collectively, therefore, African-Caribbean students even now find themselves in the bottom levels of the educational attainment charts, with boys performing even worse than their Black female counterparts and other groups (Ofsted, 1999; DfES,2006). For African-Caribbean students the problem of underachievement becomes even more pronounced as boys progress through secondary schools and the difference becomes more exaggerated so that

although 'Black Caribbean pupils make a sound start in primary schools their performance shows a marked decline at secondary level' (Ofsted, 1999, p7).

The problem of underachievement at secondary school is further compounded by the:

> *worrying ignorance generally, about how to raise the attainment of Black Caribbean boys.*
> Ofsted, 1999, p8

In essence, therefore, not only do schools have a problem regarding the achievement of African-Caribbean pupils (particularly boys), but Ofsted's research now indicates that schools have little idea on how they may address this problem. As such, Black pupils in schools find themselves in educational double jeopardy, where they are not supported to achieve, and where the deliverers of education lack the necessary skills, knowledge or understanding to assist them in achieving. The evidence that shows African-Caribbean pupils underachieve in the statutory sector is irrefutable, and has been demonstrated on numerous occasions by both independent and Government sponsored reports. However, even more worryingly, it appears that there is a lack of understanding on how this problem may be addressed. There remains a real need to discover:

> *what is happening to Black Caribbean pupils to cause a good start in primary schools to turn into such a marked decline and take action to reverse it.*
> Ofsted, 1999, p11

Much of the evidence available points to the underachievement and marginalisation of Black students in schools, who survive in a hostile and punishing climate. Some schools, however, are experiencing greater success with Black students and appear to be providing a more appropriate educational experience. In 'Achievement of Black Caribbean Pupils: Good Practice in Secondary Schools' Ofsted worked with six comprehensive schools based in London and Wolverhampton to identify what features contributed to the success of Black Caribbean students. In these schools, in common with FE, Ofsted found evidence of strong staff support and pupils 'appreciated the way the majority of staff stuck by them, come what may' (Ofsted, 2002, p17), with some students commenting that 'I like the vibes of the place. I want to come to school to achieve, it's a friendly atmosphere' (ibid). In her work with three Bristol secondary schools Wisdom recorded that pupils needed and wanted to know that they

were 'valued and respected' by tutors (2005, p11). All these schools had clear and explicit expectations of all students, high levels of student support, unambiguous leadership, and a productive work-focussed ethos. These schools appeared to counter the national trend and produce higher levels of achievement for their Black Caribbean pupils, when compared to similar schools.

The evidence here is compelling. The overall national picture for Black students is one of low academic achievement with small isolated pockets of good practice. More usually the literature confirms that in the secondary school sector, Black students routinely fail in and are failed by a system, which appears to have no real idea about how this problem may be addressed.

Research into FE has, however, been more limited and there is less information relating to the experience of all learners in this sector. Research by Fyfe and Figueroa has shown that Black students, in spite of having an academically unproductive time while at school, are positively motivated to continue their education within FE and to 'persevere with their education in the hope of improving their prospects and obtaining their desired occupation' (1993, p234). Indeed, this positive motivation to remain in education may be as a result of underachieving in the statutory sector and, in common with others who may not have achieved their goals in the compulsory education sector, view FE as opportunity to gain 'what they feel they have missed and what they believe carries most status: academic qualifications' (FEU, 1985, p5,). This strong positive motivation and pro-educational stance was also shown by Eggleston and his research team who found 'a high participation rate in further education by Afro-Caribbean young people' (1986, p29). Eggleston's research team further noted that there was significant evidence to demonstrate the 'persistence and determination of Afro-Caribbean young people to pursue qualifications through further education' (1986, p30). Even though Eggleston's research is now over 25 years old this situation still persists, and has more recently been supported by further research from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England and Wales (NIACE), which has shown that:

> *Africans (82%), people of mixed ethnic origin (80%) other minority ethnic groups (79%) and Caribbeans (72%) exhibit higher than average levels of participation in learning.*
>
> Aldridge and Tuckett, 2003, p7

Other recent research by the DfES has also demonstrated that despite a poor school experience, Black students wish to continue their education beyond statutory requirements within a college environment, and:

> *a study of young Black men in post-16 education has suggested that college can offer a chance to re-enter education and mainstream opportunities for young people who have been alienated by previous experiences of schooling.*
>
> Bhattacharyya, Ison, Blair, 2003, p24

With such strong positive motivation to remain in education, it would be both wasteful and harmful for students to continue to FE, only to have their school experiences replicated in the tertiary sector. FE colleges appear to have acknowledged this position and, although the situation remains alarmingly stark for the secondary compulsory sector, in 'Race Equality in Further Education: A Report by HMI', findings indicate:

> *learners from all ethnic backgrounds are increasingly succeeding in achieving their qualifications in the FE sector. Overall success rates for learners of BME heritage of all ages increased at an above average rate between 2002 and 2004. For 16-18 year old learners, particularly in GFE colleges, there were some significant improvements for particular groups whose success rates were exceptionally low previously, such as Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black Other learner.*
>
> Ofsted, 2005, p16

The evidence is limited at this stage, and the results of the Ofsted survey do not claim to be a nationwide survey of all FE colleges or representative of the entire FE sector. However, 41 colleges participated in the survey, representing approximately 10 per cent of FE colleges nationally (as a result of the fluidity of the FE sector with colleges merging and reforming it is not possible to give a better percentage indication). Moreover a critical finding of this survey is that, whereas schools do not appear to be supporting or promoting achievement of their Black pupils, FE colleges are achieving some degree of success in this capacity. Indeed, the report shows that in contrast to schools where Black students are underachieving at all levels their success in FE 'increased at an above average rate' (ibid, p16) for three consecutive years. In comparison to the maintained sector, this can be seen as being at least a qualified success, in

that Black students are being given the opportunity to both participate and to achieve within a college environment.

In this section I have compared the academic achievement of Black males in the school and FE sectors by using a variety of different data sets provided, by among others, Ofsted and the LSC. While this is not a direct like for like comparison, as schools will work with all Black males and FE colleges only work with those learners who chose to attend FE, this data is still useful as it provides a point of comparison between the two sectors and indicates the relative achievement of Black males in these two different environments.

4.4. The Social Positioning of Black Males in Secondary Schools and in FE

Most of the research in the UK regarding the educational experience of Black students has focussed on their academic achievement (see section *4.3 The Academic Location of Black Males in the Secondary and FE Sectors*). Little has been said regarding the social positioning of this group, and for this reason I have used a mixture of UK and US based research. Although it is accepted that the US education system is not a direct equivalent to the UK system, such findings are still meaningful within the context of this research as they help to paint a broader picture of the relationships Black students experience within educational establishments with both staff and peer groups. I am not claiming that the experience of Black Americans and those of Black students in the UK are identical, yet as many of these experiences are based on tangible responses to race it is reasonable to assert that there will be similarities between these two cohorts.

The social position occupied by Black males within education is a production of the meeting of a number of distinct yet interconnected entities. Firstly there are the Black males themselves, who have a racialised and gendered collective understanding of what it means to be a Black male in society (Majors and Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003) ; secondly there are the academic and other staff who will formulate a view of this group, and as result of their own positioning, will occupy a powerful site from which they can further influence how Black males are viewed and received by the organisation (Verma, Bagley, 1983; White-Hood, 1994; Wright, Weekes, McGlaughlin and Webb 1998); thirdly there is the corporate body which will through the use of staff and other mechanisms act to locate Black males within the structure as a whole (Sewell, 1997; Blair, 2001; Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000). The collective interaction of these different units act to produce a social positioning of Black males which is both gendered and racialised.

Within the secondary school sector, Black males occupy a unique position which is determined and governed by their race and their gender. Their maleness means there can be a 'perceived physical threat of African Caribbean boys (which is) located within stereotypical notions of Black masculinity' (Sewell, 1997, p40). While their race, even though many students will be born in the UK, positions them as outsiders to the dominant white culture. While accepting that these multiple identities are not fixed, and can alter depending on the different environments and cultures that the Black males move between, the combination of these factors means that the usual identity of Black males in schools is not solely a production of personal construction, but is determined, to a degree, by the ruling hegemony which portrays them as both hostile and 'exotic' (Swanson, Cunningham and Spencer, 2003), as 'one big lump of rebellious, phallocentric underachievers' (Sewell, 2004, p103).

In their interactions with staff and other students Black students report open and subtle discrimination including inadequate or hostile teacher attention and disproportionably high levels of exclusion (Mac an Ghaill 1988; London Development Agency, 2004).
Sewell's account (1997) in particular describes how Black boys are simultaneously portrayed as sexually intimidating and aggressive, resulting in both formal and informal exclusions. Further research by Nehusi and Gosling in East London University (2001) reveal discrimination by staff towards Black students and research in US colleges has produced a similar picture of discrimination by staff and exclusion from social and academic settings by peers (Cuyjet 1998; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald and Byisma 2003; Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000). Unfortunately attempts by students to be actively engaged in the learning process were sometimes misinterpreted as hostility and 'for some simply attempting to express an opinion was perceived as being rude and a challenge to the teacher's authority' (London Development Agency, 2004, p8)

The DfES 'Report on Minority Ethnic Students in Higher Education' although acknowledging issues created by the small sample size, noted that 'students were most likely to report having experienced discrimination as a result of their race' (2003, p92), and that 'there was sometimes a feeling that academic departments could have done more to include everyone' (ibid, p93), echoing the findings of social exclusion. In an earlier study Blair found that for many Black students education had become a battlefield which 'was difficult enough in primary school' (2001, p73) and by secondary school had become an almost impossible, 'obstacle course' (ibid). According to Blair's research Black males are systematically vilified in the statutory

sector so that they find themselves 'represented as violent, aggressive, sexually out of control and engaged in illicit activities such as mugging and drug pushing' (ibid, p81).

Thus an overall picture of discrimination in both the statutory sector and within FE and HE is apparent for Black students, with males in particular, experiencing a hostile and intimidating environment which works to exclude them from education and to socially marginalize them. Often, as a response to this situation Black males create alternative sub-cultures and spaces within the mainstream as a method of survival. This was demonstrated by Wright who observed that when African-Caribbean students congregated in corridors during break times, as a means of creating their own social spaces, they 'frequently attracted the attention of the teacher or teachers on break duty (and) the teacher often responded to this situation by interrogatively ushering the group out of the corridor' (1998, p76). Again, it seems that the prevailing belief of staff is that the only reason that Black students could have for congregating in this way was to carry out some illicit activity or practice. A similar picture was found in the research by the London Development Agency, where students found themselves 'wrongly accused, watched with suspicion at lunchtimes, subject to negative stereotyping and simply being disliked on account of being Black' (2004, p8). Again it is evident that negative staff perceptions result in Black students receiving unwarranted teacher attention.

The position of Black students did not improve in the classroom in their direct relations with academic staff. In this situation, students frequently found that when they received tutor attention, it was often negative in nature, or that they were excluded from academic or learning conversations. Most often teacher interactions were characterised by being 'overlooked for answering questions, verbal aggression from teachers, and harsher reprimands than for students from other ethnic backgrounds for the same misdemeanour' (London Development Agency, 2004, p7). Additionally students reported that often they were not 'listened to or understood by white teachers' (ibid, p8). The picture here is one of complete cultural misunderstanding, with Black students attempting to be involved in their education, but being prevented from doing so.

4.5. Black Students Presentation of Self in Secondary and FE Sectors

Within the context of poor academic achievement and being identified as, at best an outsider and at worst as an aggressive assailant, Black males face a choice – a choice of whether they will conform to imposed stereotypes or whether they will present an alternative construction of themselves. The presentation of self is thus a live issue for all Black males in education. Black

males can consciously and knowingly make such a choice and so seek to influence their own presentation and the perceptions of others, or may unconsciously and unknowingly act, in which case they will have no planned effect on their presentation, which will effectively become an accidental occurrence. In either case, whether controlled and orchestrated or not, their actual actions will be judged by a wider community and will serve either to confirm or to challenge prevailing imagery of Black males.

Much of the media portrays Black males as 'super athlete, criminal, gangster or hypersexual male' (Swanson, Cunningham and Spencer, 2003). It is against this background that Black males find themselves in a position of not necessarily being judged on their academic abilities or other attributes, but on preconceived stereotypes which are governed by their racial identity. Guilt is conferred by the media suggestion that Black males as a group are bad, and that *all* Black males, without exception, fit into this category.   It is not the person who is seen but an image of Black masculinity, and by default all Black males are assumed to behave and act in a fashion predetermined by this stereotype. There is no recognition of individuality or difference, and Black males are viewed as a homogenous whole where the 'diversity and heterogeneity that has marked British culture throughout' (Westwood, 1989, p1) is ignored.

Although Black males become demonised as they grow into men, at the beginning of their primary school education, research suggests that this negative image of Black males does not exist. Research in the US shows that 'upon entering school in primary grades, Black children possess enthusiasm and eager interest' (Grant, 1992, p17), and in the UK 'Black Caribbean pupils make a sound start in Primary schools' (Ofsted, 1999, p7). However, this positive representation and presentation does not persist and at some indeterminate time prior to the transfer to secondary education, the perception of Black males changes to the stereotypical image identified earlier, in which schools become 'content to live with general 'impressions' or 'hunches' about the performance of different groups of pupils' (Ofsted, 1999, p7). The result of the acceptance of stereotypes by teaching staff, is that underperformance and/or resistance by Black males is anticipated, and indeed to some degree, expected. Thus, by the time they enter secondary schools Black males are placed in the position where they are obliged to make a conscious or unconscious choice, of the image and behaviour they will choose to adopt – choosing either to conform to imposed negative and destructive stereotypes or choosing to resist such images and pursue scholarly activities.

Some Black students will choose to conform to the 'rude-boy', stereotype in which 'they are more likely to act out in the classroom' (Noguera, 2003, p437) and to present challenging behaviour to school or college staff. In his work in UK secondary schools, Sewell (1997) found a similar picture, where numbers of Black males conformed to the stereotype of the aggressive, underachieving male. Such a presentation produced a comparable negative response in many of the staff who taught the students. In one of the schools involved in the study he recorded that approximately 90% of the teaching staff were either irritated by, or openly antagonistic to the Black male students as a result of their behaviour and presentation, finding it difficult to cope with what they perceived as 'macho-posturing'. Staff believed that such behaviour was designed to maintain the Black students' street credibility and enhance their image amongst their peer group, for it was 'social regard, not white-sanctioned values such as academic achievement' (Wickline, 2003, p9) and the desire 'to be anointed "cool" by his peers' (Connor, 2003, p31) which Black males valued the most.

Some students choose to pursue another stereotypical presentation and adopt the 'cool pose' described by Majors (1992). In this instance Black males 'assume facades of high self-esteem, aloofness and calmness' (Wickline, 2003, p9). Wickline goes onto suggest the reason for adopting this position is defence, for it simultaneously allows Black males to distance themselves from and question the value of the educational mainstream. Failure is a predicted outcome, yet 'cool pose' provides protection here, for no shame can be attached to failure in a discredited and devalued system.

'Cool pose' can also be interpreted as defiance. Although it may lack the overt aggression or hostility of other presentations, it is dismissive of authority and authority figures. It represents that intangible irritant experienced by teaching staff, as explained by one teacher (Ms Williams) in Sewell's study, who said:

> *The Black pupils act in a particular way. The way they challenge authority is very different to the way the white pupils challenge authority. They do it in a particular style. It is the same way they relate to each other and this comes out of their sub-culture.*
> 1997, p36

Thus, even though aggression may be absent, the 'particular way' that Black males choose to act, still manages to cause offence and insult to teachers, as it represents a direct challenge to

structural authority and the dominant hegemonic culture, and by implication, white mainstream culture and white teachers. By their actions their Blackness is accentuated and their refusal to conform to or be assimilated by the dominant mainstream culture is brought into sharp focus. It is this rejection and repudiation of white culture that causes difficulties, as Black males are not just refusing to conform, they are signalling a denunciation of and indifference to white mainstream culture.

Issues of race are important here. Black teachers, as a consequence of their role, will also find themselves in a position of authority, and can also be said to be part of the dominant culture, yet Black teachers are not necessarily judged in the same way as white teachers. However, it appears that Black teachers are not automatically identified as authority figures in the same way. Exactly why this should occur is not completely clear, however, it is possible there is an assumption by Black youth that Black teachers will have some awareness and understanding of race discrimination. Again, issues of visibility are critical here, in which any Black face regardless of location or position is identified as a potential ally. This phenomenon was experienced by Wright who observed that Black students would, as a consequence of her ethnicity, view her as a natural ally and 'many Black students would identify with (her) as a Black woman and would look to (her) for support during conflict with their teachers' (1998, p68). However, although it may be tempting for Black students to view other Black adults as allies, such cultural trust may not always be well founded and 'teachers' racial, ethnic or cultural affiliations do not make them immune from holding negative self-fulfilling prophecies about the children whom they teach' (Garibaldi, 1991, p45).

Nehusi and Gosling also noted that one of the problems facing Black males in education is 'the lack of role models' (2001, p3) suggesting that if there were greater numbers of Black teaching staff, the same Black teaching staff would interpret the behaviour of Black students differently, and would not perceive a challenge to authority. Thus, the number of clashes Black students experienced with structures and authority would be reduced, and the 'cultural mistrust' (Phelps, Taylor, Gerard, 2001, p209) that Black students felt towards white teachers in which there was an 'inclination among Blacks to mistrust whites' would be removed (ibid).

This argument is supported by Ladson-Billings who comments that successful teachers of Black youth, display 'cultural congruence' and alter their 'speech patterns, communication styles and participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students own culture' (1994, p16). Again, by implication it is more likely that Black teachers will display such

cultural congruence and will therefore be able to work more effectively with Black students. However, Ladson-Billings observations contain a further implication. It is not suggested that such speech patterns and behaviours are the sole preserve of Black teachers alone and it would be possible that white teachers could, if they chose to, also adopt such behaviours and so increase their ability to effectively communicate with Black students. The impact of this lack of cultural congruence was expressed in the London Development Agency Research where students felt they were not 'understood by white teachers' (2004, p8) and Mendoza-Denton and Downey noted there was a 'mistrust of whites' (2002, p898) among Black students. However, even if white teachers chose to adopt language and behaviour patterns more commonly displayed by Black students, there is no guarantee this would be accepted by the Black students who may view such actions with suspicion or even derision.

'Cool pose' can also be interpreted as a rational response to an education which denies opportunities to Black males and 'circumscribes their ambitions' (Allen, 2006, p13). In this scenario, 'cool pose' represents a logical response to a system that, no matter how hard you work, you will never receive fair representation or reward. Many Black students, males in particular, have become used to being singled out for unfair treatment, and even when they try hard, they receive hostile or unfair teacher attention (Eggleston, Dunn, Anjal and Wright, 1986; Polite, 1994, Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000; Blair, 2001). In this situation, it becomes a rational choice to disengage from an unfair and oppressive regime, which Black males understand will not reward their efforts. Here, 'cool pose', does not represent an emotional reaction, but is a logical response based on perceived facts and knowledge of the existing system.

Most formulations of 'cool pose' are a negative embodiment of a rejection of traditional education. However, 'cool pose' also serves a positive function for the Black males as it provides a mechanism for the assertion of a collective group identity. For many Black males it is a way of signalling legitimate membership to Black culture, in its denial of mainstream values and standards. In this conception 'cool pose' is consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs where 'belongingness needs have predominance over esteem and achievement needs' (Wickline, 2003, p9).

Although 'cool pose', which has become 'the norm for most young Black males between the ages of ten and twenty' (hooks, 2001, p42) may have social capital, allowing Black males to

retain integrity among peers, it is an inherently perilous strategy. 'Cool pose', by its very nature, seeks to accentuate the differences between Black males and the education system, and wider society beyond. In doing so, it formulates Black males as outsiders to the system who do not belong and have no place within it. To adopt a 'cool pose' stance, means by definition, Black males no longer choose to engage or associate with some sectors of society, generally the ruling hegemony. Instead, they rely solely upon the support and reserves of the Black community. In this monoculture, 'cool pose' changes from being a reaction to conditions and becomes a way of life. However, those who choose to operate outside of the system may find it difficult to navigate a path back into the system at a later stage. Effectively, adopting a 'cool pose' stance runs the risk of making Black males permanent outsiders to some sectors of society. While 'cool pose' may have its origins in Black culture, it is interesting to reflect that these same mannerisms have, to some degree, been adopted by many young white people, presumably in an attempt to also be accepted as cool. Indeed, street culture has rapidly responded to this phenomenon and has generated a street name for this group, referring to them as 'wiggers[2]'. However, the impact of adopting such behaviour by white youth has not been considered in this thesis and is beyond the scope of the primary research question.

Not all Black males, however, choose to reject mainstream education, and operate on the outside, and 'even if few in number, there are students who manage to maintain their identities and achieve academically without being ostracised by their peers' (Noguera, 2003, p446). Noguera further observes that some Black males operating within the system will accommodate a variety of difficulties, but:

> *interestingly, we know much less about resilience and perseverance and the coping strategies employed by individuals whose lives are surrounded by hardships than we do about those who succumb and become victims of their environment.*
> 2003, p438

To survive in a fundamentally antagonistic environment Black students have to develop strategies to support their survival. From my reading of the literature there are four basic survival strategies that can be adopted, each of which has a number of associated hazards.

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[2] Wiggers: A white nigga: A white person who thinks they are Black

The first strategy is where individuals choose to take on conventional mannerisms 'which conformed to accepted school norms' (Rhamie and Hallam, 2002, p159) and chose not to rebel against school, accepting 'its means and goals' (Sewell, 2004, p104). This could involve any number of changes to behaviour including modifying dress, speech and demeanour. In their research, Figueroa and Nehaul, describe a student who 'learned to speak like the English in college' (1999, p14), as a way of surviving and accessing education. Similarly, hooks, reflecting on her education comments that 'if one was not from a privileged class group, adopting a demeanour similar to that of the group could help one to advance' (1994, p178).

Although this approach may afford individuals some degree of academic success, it is the position that is most likely court censure by their other Black peers, not least because some Black males appear to be incapable of uniting pro-school attitudes with being Black, choosing instead to link 'academic achievement with being gay or effeminate'(Sewell, 2004, p107). Here individuals are seen as surrendering their membership to a collective community identity for individual gain. This is the 'sell-out' position, where individuals can be viewed as suspending their ethnic identity and adopting the behaviours and practices of the oppressing majority, for the sake of their own personal academic achievement. To a degree, this strategy was evidenced in this research, and in section *6.1.3, Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges*, where one of the research participants, LB, describes how he changed his dress pattern so in his perception, he could more easily fit into college culture. In this situation the advantages to the individual are clear, but the gains to the combined Black community are viewed, at the best, as tenuous, and are certainly deferred.

In the second strategy, individuals choose to become 'invisible'. In this strategy individuals adopt a passive, 'raceless' persona, in which once again, their focus is on individual academic achievement and meeting the demands of the teacher (Fordham, 1996). They do not actively resist or challenge authority and are not seen to fight back against the domination of an unjust system. In this configuration students wish to quietly 'get on' and as far as possible to retain anonymity. This presentation could also be described as a 'sell-out', although at least there is a less obvious compromise of integrity and Black identity. As such, it is possible for Black students choosing this tactic to more easily avoid the criticisms of their peers, while at the same time potentially gaining favour with their tutors.

The final two strategies both involve fighting back, but in two very different ways, and consequently both strategies allow individuals to maintain a high degree of racial congruence. The first of these two strategies involves making an overt challenge to structures and questioning or denouncing authority. Educationally this is a high risk strategy. For academically able students this strategy carries the risk of being moved from top sets to lower level classes, on the grounds that overt challenge is inappropriate to an academic environment and would impair the progress of other students in the group. Although this may mean that Black males, who are often over-represented in lower groups, would then be re-united with their peer group, they deny themselves the opportunity of higher academic achievement.

The final resistance option is the 'most enlightening yet difficult to enact' (Noguera, 2003, p447). In this option Black students exercise their resistance through their work. These students demonstrate that they disagree with opinions and views that may have been expressed accepting that they will be 'penalised for doing so' (ibid, p444), not in a public arena which may cause teacher objections, but in their written feedback. However, by taking this more subtle option, Black students ensure that they remain in classes for the more able students, and so allow themselves the opportunity for advanced achievement. The principal difficulty with this strategy is that Black students can often find themselves isolated and without the support of their peers, and on the surface may appear to be conforming so could still attract criticism from their Black peers.

As well as occurring in secondary schools, it is my assertion that as the time delay in transferring from secondary to FE is so short that some or all of these presentations, are likely to be manifested at FE. Unfortunately, the specific presentation of Black males in FE is less well researched, and it is not possible to make a definitive statement on the presentation of Black males in this sector, save to say that the research described above is drawn from (among other locations) American High schools where students study until they are 18. However, as stated earlier in this chapter, to continue to study at FE is a conscious choice. Black males will be aware of the penalties associated with non-conformity, indeed some Black males at FE will have been 'released early' from schools for failing to fit into the ethos of the school, and will be aware, to some degree, of the need to conform to the ethos of their receiving college. It is here that FE colleges have a specific advantage over schools. FE colleges were established to meet the needs of an adult population and some of the rules which are deemed necessary in schools are absent. There are no uniforms, no bells and no imposed deference requirement to staff. It

could almost be said, that in education terms, the ethos of FE is wholly consistent with cool pose, in its apparent disregard for formality. In this respect many Black males find that they no longer need to adopt the passive or active resistance strategies employed at school, as their dress choice, speech patterns and demeanour are no longer challenged in the same way. As two students observed in this research it was possible to:

> KB: Just be yourself. You're just being how you are. Your own environment really
> KHa: It's freedom really
> L2 Art Focus Group lines290-291

4.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have established the initial key definitions needed for my research, and I have reviewed the literature available to place my work within an overall context. I have used the literature to inform my discussion on the differences between secondary education and FE, and have drawn distinctions between these two sectors. I have shown where Black students are located academically within the secondary sector from 1978 through to 2005. I have discussed the social positioning of Black males and have considered how Black males, through their own agency may influence their presentation within education, and I have commented on how this presentation in turn may influence their access to education. And while many Black males have 'been labelled as "the lost tribe" ' (Sewell, 2009, p3) confined to the backwaters of academic underachievement or consigned to the dead end of educational failure 'given the right attention (Black males) may well be hidden leaders of a new generation' (ibid). This is the challenge for schools and colleges alike, how can they, how will they 'reverse underachievement' (ibid, p1) of generations of Black males and turn them 'into the next generation of doctors and scientists' (ibid) and other success stories?

The lived experiences and presentations of Black males in FE as exemplified by two Midlands colleges forms the basis of this thesis. These experiences, realities and perceptions are explored in detail in Chapter 6, *Research Findings*, and based on these findings recommendations for future practice are suggested in Chapter 8, *Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations.*

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To offer a single definition of research would be both simplistic and wishful. Research is not easily defined and can take on many different meanings to different audiences in different times and circumstances, and, it is an ongoing task for individual researchers to present their understanding of research to their audience. I will use this chapter to complete this task and I will strive to make clear my understanding of the terms research and methodology.

Having explained the terms used in this research, I will go on to describe the approaches and practices I employed in conducting my research and how these same approaches and practices relate to and were informed by existing knowledge and theory. I will use the chapter to locate the research within existing paradigms and I will explain why I chose to adopt certain approaches while rejecting others. This chapter will therefore act as a guide to the thought processes and reasoning I used in the research design and analysis process, and as a bridge to the prevailing canon of knowledge. The way in which this research adds to the existing body of knowledge will be explained in Chapter 6, *Research Findings*, where I provide details of the outcomes of the research. My research does not claim to be a singular truth, applicable to *all* Black males studying in FE, however, it does provide further illumination into the experience of this group and contributes to an 'outline theory of uncertain knowledge' (Griffiths, 1998, p81), while helping to develop a greater awareness of the experiences of Black males in the FE sector.

5.1 Research Terminology Used in this Study

Clough and Nutbrown state that the purpose of much research is 'not so much to prove things – but more to investigate questions and explore issues' (2007, p4). Further they assert that 'research is also a moral act' and 'researchers work for the social "good" of communities' (ibid). My research is consistent with both these assertions for I begin from the premise that little was known about the experience of Black males in FE and I believed that this was both a knowledge gap and an opportunity to 'develop deeper understandings' (ibid, p9) which could eventually help to improve the situation of Black males in FE. My research journey was an act of 'finding out, of purposive enquiry' (ibid, p6) to help to produce a more complete and detailed knowledge of Black male students' education.

This research also has a moral dimension, as suggested by Clough and Nutbrown, for it is my intention that this research should 'help move the agenda forward (for Black males) and seek solutions rather than reiterate problems' (*Personal Research Journal, 20 October, 2006*). This is a grand claim, and while I do not believe that this research will conclusively identify the 'solution' to the problems of underachievement and discrimination experienced by Black males (see Chapter 4, *Literature Review*) indeed I do not believe there is one single solution which would be relevant for all Black males in all circumstances, it remains my sincere intention that this research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this area and will ultimately help to 'shift the emphasis from problems to be dealt with to strategies to improve' (*Personal Research Journal, 20 October, 2006*).

According to Winch education research is target and goal orientated, with 'four clearly identifiable aims' (2002, p154) namely:

- knowledge production about education;
- the formulation of educational policy;
- the improvement of the workings of education ;
- and to contribute to radical changes in society.

Although claiming that these four aims are common to all educational research, Winch does not assert that all aims will be pursued to the same level in each instance, for these aims will 'assume a different importance for different researchers' (ibid) and similarly may also be subject to different and changing agendas. Again, my research has much in common with this definition. While it is not possible to predict the eventual outcomes of this or any other research, it is certainly my intention that the research findings will be read by policy makers, Principals in FE and elsewhere, and other decision makers and will help to shape policy development and action in the FE sector. I want this research to 'bring about some (however modest) kind of change' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, p14). My research was thus a morally motivated, goal orientated enquiry with an aim of adding to current knowledge, which could be used by policy makers in education to bring about a 'change for the better' (ibid, p4) for Black male students. This research is not an end in itself, but is a dynamic process of continual and evolving discovery, designed to feed into broader debates.

If research is a difficult concept to define then methodology presents even greater difficulties. Clough and Nutbrown state:

> *a characteristic purpose of a methodology is to show not how such and such appeared to be the best method available for the given purposes of the study, but how and why this way of doing it was unavoidable – was required by - the context and purpose of this particular enquiry.*

2007, p19

Methodology demands that the research must 'be located – and justified – in terms of an argument about the very nature and structure of knowledge and knowing' and that researchers 'justify their particular research decisions, from the outset to the conclusion of their enquiry' (ibid). Framed in this way methodology is not about the particular techniques or actions undertaken to investigate the research question, but is about identifying a theoretical and knowledge position from which the research question will be explored. It is the function of methodology to 'locate the claims which the research makes within the traditions of enquiry' (ibid, p34). In this way methodology provides the grander view from which the particular can be explored through the construction of 'pains-takingly custom-built' (ibid, p29) tools produced to investigate the 'quite particular needs and purposes' (ibid) of the research question.

The key feature of this research is the lived experiences and the daily realities of the research participants, and therefore it was critical that I employed an approach that would capture the feelings and emotions of the research participants and would give voice to these phenomena. This research does not presume to adopt a 'gods-eye view' of the world, sometimes associated with the grander metanarratives, rather I will provide a personalised, situated interpretation of my findings, based on the collected data.

To accommodate this I used an 'interpretivisit , qualitative style of research' (Henn, Weinstein, Foard, 2006, p18). To give a fuller account of the educational experience of the Black males involved in this research I have also included some additional numerical data relating to academic achievement. Interpretivism allows researchers to work with participants to 'provide an account of their world in their own words' (ibid, p14) and it was important that the research participants *were* supported to use their own words to describe their experiences. Further this approach allowed me to begin with my 'relatively broad

research question rather than a pre-specified hypothesis' (ibid, p15). To investigate my research interest I used 'qualitative methods and personal involvement to gain an understanding of how people interpret the world around them' (ibid), and by the same process develop meaning for themselves of their location within and to the world. This research further suited an interpretivisit approach as my purpose was:

> *not to explain why something happens, but to explore or build up an understanding of something we have little or no knowledge of.*
>
> ibid

Moreover the methods of social science were adopted in favour of the natural sciences as it was important that this study allowed the experience of the participants' to be explored 'through the eyes of the participants rather than the researcher' (Cohen, Mannion, Morrison, 2000, p22). The research was not suited to the 'mechanistic and reductionist view of nature' (ibid, p17), as such methods lacked the potential to adequately capture the feelings and emotions of the research participants and 'precludes an adequate apprehension of the world' (Orleans, 1991, p1). Moreover there are some 'phenomena that cannot be explained by the methodology of natural science' alone (Hutson, 2002, p149).

As the nature of this inquiry was to investigate the life experiences of Black males once they entered FE, the research by its very nature, was developmental and exploratory. And, as the research progressed, it continually evolved and changed as I sought to respond to prevailing situations and conditions, in an attempt to unearth new information which was not readily on view. The research process, like the research area itself, was a dynamic entity.

5.2 Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

Research is, and has to be, related to other theories, models and paradigms. This research is no exception to this position, and I will use this section of the chapter to explain how my research is linked to and has been influenced by other theories and knowledge.

5.2.1 The Research Question and Phenomenology

In this section I will describe why this research is best located within phenomenological enquiry. Phenomenology is 'an umbrella term' (Finlay, 2005, p1) and has many different meanings. Although many scholars have discussed phenomenology, even now there is no single universally agreed definition of the term. Consequently there is considerable

confusion surrounding phenomenology which been variously described as 'a philosophy, methodology and method' (Byrne, 2001, p1). This conflation of these terms adds to this confusion as these terms are not in themselves mutually compatible, and nor are they synonyms of each other.

The confusion regarding phenomenology is further fuelled by the many different types of phenomenology developed over time by different scholars and the particular area of phenomenology being explored is not always clearly explained. In this research I will be drawing on the ideas of 'exisential phenomenology (which) studies concrete human existence' and 'realistic phenomenology (which) studies the structure of consciousness and intentionality' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2003, online). As both these forms of phenomenological enquiry are concerned with in-the-world experience and how experiences are perceived and understood by individuals, they were ideally suited to explore the lived experiences of the research participants.

'The father of phenomenology frequently is cited as Edmund Husserl' (Byrne, 2001, p1) whose ideas have been developed and refined by later scholars including Heidegger, Hegel, Satre and Merleau-Ponty. My research has been primarily influenced by the work of Husserl and Heidegger and the key concepts of consciousness, intentionality and in-the-world experience as espoused by those two philosophers are key features of my research. This research further draws on Husserlian thought in its 'attempt to study essences of phenomena as they appear in consciousness' (Finlay, 2005, p1) which I explored with participants through a series of in-depth discussions and individual interviews. Further I was able to investigate Heidegger's ideas of 'exploring a person's sense of self, space, time, embodiment and relations with others' (ibid) through discussions with the research participants and by observing the participants in social and academic environments. Using these two different ways of understanding and making sense of the world as framed by Husserl and Heidegger I was able to explore the 'collective life experiences' (Byrne, 2001, p2) of the research participants.

Phenomenology, is a discourse which provides an alternative construction of knowledge which resists grand positivist metanarratives. Phenomenology resists singular constructions of truth and because the world is viewed through the eyes of the research participants it builds up a multilayered pluralist picture which embodies multiple truths and realities. Phenomenological inquiry thus supports the exploration of 'uncertain knowledge' (Griffiths,

1998, p81) described in the introduction of this chapter. By using a phenomenological methodology I was able to work with the research participants to gain access to 'another kind of knowledge' (Lyotard, 2004, p7), which challenged positivist metanarratives. Phenomenological inquiry provided me with a means of exploring this 'other knowledge': the knowledge and understanding of the world that is produced in the milieu of human relations with others and with structures; a knowledge which challenges positivist thinking and which defies categorisation according to a strict set of principles and rules.

Little currently exists to either describe or explain the experiences of Black males in the FE sector, and the opportunities provided by phenomenology to explore through observation and dialogue, through the assembling of phenomena, to make sense of the participants' lived experience, meant that a phenomenological approach was well matched to the research question. The research participants are not framed as hapless bystanders who have no understanding of, or part in the formulation of their experiences; rather they are active participants who consciously undertake activity, already having an understanding of that activity. Thus their in-the-world experience is a combination of their conscious acts and their intentionality to participate in such acts. Phenomenological inquiry provided a means of investigating how such 'human phemenoma are experienced in consciousness' (Wilson, 2002, p1), and how the research participants encountered and experienced FE, in their relationships with others and with institutional structures.

My research begins from the position that Black males come to know their world through their daily experiences, and that these experiences are based on the Husserlian premise that any circumstance, situation or object already exists in a 'relationship to consciousness' (Hutson, 2002, p148). The key features of my research; that of being Black, being male and 'education' (in this case FE), occupy such a relationship, and are all features that are accepted by the research participants as existing in a relationship to consciousness. Moreover, through their conscious acts, statements and behaviour the research participants demonstrated that they accepted these features as realities.

Further illustration of the compatibility of this study to a phenomenological approach is suitably provided through the African oral history tradition and the African adage, which states that 'until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the lion hunter'. Accepted knowledge about Black males in education have often been written from the dominant paradigms of education and often represent the understanding of

white, middle-class, male, intellectuals and academics. While I acknowledge that an outsider can effectively research the experiences of another group, the relationship that the outsider will have with the research participants will always be different to that of an insider and the resultant knowledge *will* be constructed in a different way. Knowledge as presented by white male intellectuals is further complicated by the legacies of exploitation as exemplified by colonialism, white domination and slavery. Knowledge constructed in this way is open to criticisms of distortion and residual racist attitudes, and this same knowledge will be valued differently be different racial groups (for a fuller discussion see Chapter 7 *Knowledge, Validity and Representation*).

Over time this position has altered, as a growing number of Black researchers have contributed to the debate (see for example, Wright, 1998; Sewell, 2009; Blair, 2001; Channer, 1995; Majors, 2003), yet many of the available texts still conform to a dominant white male perspective. As a result Black males have most consistently been represented by the lion hunters and subject to the attendant distortion of the hunt and the hunter. My own position in relation to this study is explored in detail in Chapter 2, *Locating Myself as a Researcher*, where I indicate I am simultaneously an insider by virtue of my historic, cultural and racial connections, and an outsider as a result of my age, gender and employment status. Being positioned in this way provided me with an opportunity to gain access to cherished information which may not be readily visible to an outsider, yet the features which confirmed my outsider status meant there could still be barriers preventing me from accessing some information as the research participants may be fearful of or resistant to sharing this information. However, outsiders by nature of their 'stranger' status could be 'best able to see things for what they are, uncluttered by assumptions that form part of everyday thinking about those things' (Denscombe, 2003, p102). Thus my own unique configuration of being both an outsider and an insider, potentially provided my with an opportunity to be in the best possible position to gain an in-depth and informed understanding of the research participants' experience.

While producing unique access opportunities, my insider position raised further issues related to phenomenological enquiry, for this positioning tested my capacity to bracket off and suspend my 'taken for granted approach' (Holroyd, 1991, p4) of the world. Indeed, phenomenology requires that researchers carry out research 'with a minimum reliance on the beliefs, expectations and predispositions about the phenomenon under investigation' (Denscombe, 2003, p102). Furthermore, researchers 'need to suspend (or bracket off) their

own beliefs temporarily for the purposes of research' (ibid).   Only through a process of 'rigorous reflection on (my) bias, opinions and cultural and socio-economic background' (Holroyd, 1991, p4), could I achieve the requirement of suspending my beliefs and 'present the experiences (of the research participants') in a way that (was) faithful to the original' (Denscombe, 2003, p98). I explore this issue in more depth in section *5.5.1 Personal Approaches to the Data Collection Process*. Thus, although it could be claimed that an insider might also view the world through a distorted lens, influenced by personal attachment and location, the knowledge produced in this way *will* be different from the dominant paradigms and has the potential to produce new insights and understanding so contributing to the overall knowledge base and providing privileged information to the debate.

This research adds to the challenges of the dominant position where knowledge is 'systemised or totalised into a singular, all-encompassing framework' (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p8) and moves away from the popular and populist ways of representing Black males in education, by providing the Black males with a mechanism which legitimises and values their voice and so allows them to represent themselves in their own words and to present knowledge about their realities as they themselves experience and understand it.   The lions themselves thus determine the essence of their existence and realities, and in doing so the research confirms its phenomenological status in that it 'oversteps the implicit yet powerful limits set by more mainstream research traditions and paradigms' (Usher, Bryant and Johnstone, 1997, p187).

The decision to adopt a phenomenological approach was an initially intuitive decision informed by my familiarity with the research environment and the research participants. As a result of my understanding of these issues, I developed a further understanding of a research approach which would 'work for' and 'fit' my research question. For my research I needed an 'under the skin' approach. I needed a methodology which would allow me to see beyond the immediate and into the essence of the participants' experience to 'illuminate the human meanings of social life' (Orleans, 1991, p1). My selected methodology therefore, needed to provide a way of understanding the research participants and their world and how they operated within that world. Other forms of qualitative research, such as action research which 'starts with a problem' (Burton and Barlett, 2007, p51) and 'then a plan of action is devised in the light of this evidence (which is) put into place and the effects carefully monitored' (ibid) were not suitable, as my research question was not about a 'problem' in which essentially the Black students themselves were the causal factor of an unacceptable

situation , characterised by isolation, marginalisation and underachievement, and if the Black students themselves could be metamorphosed into something else the 'problem' would disappear, but a circumstance that required further investigation. Moreover, I had no intention to intervene to change the immediate daily experiences of the research participants and effectively 'solve' their problems. Similarly, although my research had some elements of case study within it, in that it was investigating 'a bounded system' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2000, p181) of 'real people in real situations' (ibid) there was no attempt to 'establish cause and effect' (ibid) of a particular problem. Phenomenology provided an alternative qualitative way of investigating my research question while leaving the lives of the research participants as untouched and intact as possible. Phenomenological enquiry allowed me to work *with* the research participants rather than *on* them.

However, the challenge of this research was to find a way which allowed me as the researcher, to 'see the world differently-freshly- and to attend more actively to the participant's views' (Finlay, 2005, p2). Only by doing this could I then claim that this research had adopted a phenomenological position. The ways I which I achieved this are discussed in section, *5.3 Selecting Methods and Approaches: The Research Design*.

My research is and was not about proving a predetermined hypothesis. This was one of the reasons why my research could not be explored through a positivist paradigm. Instead, acknowledging the lack of fixed identities for this group, I wished to investigate and collate the multiple, multi-faceted identities of Black males in FE. The knowledge I wished to explore is borne out of dynamic, change and evolution. It is not fixed knowledge, but is fluid, in time and in location. Against this context, and accepting the developmental nature of this study I assert that this study firmly sits within a phenomenological framework, both in its design and in its findings. Although an exploratory phenomenological methodology forms the basis of my research and findings, in Chapter 8 *Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations*, I will go beyond the boundaries of phenomenology of solely investigating phenomena as phenomena, and use this information to suggest possible strategies to enable Black males to have a more positive experience of education.

5.2.2 Significance of the Narrative Dimension

My research does not represent a singular truth, but is one of many truths that simultaneously exist within educational contexts. And yet, in writing about groups (of which I as the

researcher may, or may not be able to claim to be part) my research has a particular problem in representation, and how can I, or the reader, know whose experience is represented? Is it

The 'subject's' experience?   Is it the 'author's'? Or reflexively, is it the 'reader's'?

Clough, 2002, p12

This research is not storytelling, in the sense that I have not presented fictionalised accounts of the lives of the research participants (Clough, 2002), yet is 'life story research' (Leiblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998, p2) in that it provides illumination on the lives of the research participants.

Clough argues that to "give' a life history and then analyse it when it should be seamlessly self-analytical' (Clough, 2002, p15), is a flawed approach. I have addressed Clough's criticisms by presenting the data I collected in the form of participant voice, coupled with a commentary which unravels some of the issues raised by the research participants (see Chapter 6 *Research Findings*). In doing this, I have given the 'life history' of the research participants in their own words and so have retained the authenticity of the participants' voice. I have not paraphrased or re-written their words, but have recorded their actual words as they were spoken, in an effort to stay as close as possible to the participants' conception of their daily realities. Thus, the life history as related by the participants becomes self-analytical as the voice of the participants addresses the areas of concern in their own words. The commentary then, is both an analysis, and a way of identifying and consolidating consistent re-emerging themes,

Although my role as a researcher was important in capturing the participants' voice, I wanted my research to tell the research participants' story as 'the group in question experience(d) the situation' (Denscombe, 2003, p99) and for the research participants to maintain sufficient contact with the work for their voices to be clear and recognisable to them. I wished to echo the early work of Coard (1971), and instead of talking *about* the group, I was concerned I was engaged in an active dialogue *with* the group, and they in turn would find that the work had a personal resonance for them, in which their voices, if not their identities, were readily apparent.   In determining whose voice is represented, this will ultimately be a decision for the reader, and it is likely that a minimum of two distinctly different voices will be recognised: my own voice as the researcher in the commentaries provided, and yet I hope in the presentation of verbatim text I have done sufficient to maintain the voice of the research

participants, and when the participants' read this account, they will be able to recognise their voices. In this way I hope that the life stories of the participants are self-evident and answer Clough's charge of needing to let stories speak for themselves, and his further concern over the 'separation of 'data' and 'analysis'' (ibid, p15) is removed.

While the notion of claiming that stories speak for themselves is problematic, inasmuch as telling or re- telling any story ' "the respondents" voice is almost always filtered through the author's account'(Hertz, 1997, pxii), by taking care to ensure my voice did not obscure the participants' voices and by creating a situation where the participants could talk freely about their experiences, I believe I have captured the participants' stories in such a way that their story *is* self-evident, and that I needed to complete very little interpretation of this information, as the key themes and messages emerged in an evolutionary fashion. Indeed to impose my interpretation of the participants' experiences would be inconsistent with phenomenological inquiry. In this way I believe that primarily the stories have, effectively 'told themselves' and, while any story will always be mediated through the voice of the story teller, the consistency of the participants' stories and the significant agreement between the group members meant that, in essence, I simply acted as the recorder of their stories.

5.2.3 The Research Question and Quantitative Data

This study is primarily influenced by the interpretivist paradigm of phenomenology. However, because phenomenological enquiry did not provide me with a means of exploring all the aspects of my research question, the other methodological approach I used in this study fits into the quantitative paradigm. The quantitative data which has been included in this study is limited to solely consider numerical data which provides information on the academic achievement of the research group.

I have used quantitative data to consider the academic achievement both individually for the students who took part in the study and contextually for the population of Black students at the first urban college, to provide an indication of the overall academic positioning of Black males in this college. However, as a result of difficulties concerning access and because of the sensitive nature of data regarding academic achievement as determined by ethnicity, I was not able to complete this exercise for the second urban college.

The quantitative approach used in this study is therefore confined to the assembly of course achievement data, and it is used to complement qualitative data collected in other ways. For

although phenomenology provided a means of exploring the in-the-world realities of the participants as experienced through consciousness, it could not tell me how these participants had achieved in externally set qualifications. This part of the participants' experience was more effectively evidenced by end of course achievement data. As many of the participants involved in the study had not previously achieved academically, it was important to capture this aspect of their college experience so that a more complete picture of the research participants' experience could be provided. Thus the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies worked in a complementary manner to provide a rich, detailed account of the lived realities of Black males while studying in FE.

5.3 Selecting Methods and Approaches: The Research Design

For this research I have principally used qualitative methods. The purpose of the research was to describe and understand how Black males experience FE; their feelings about and towards FE and what realities they subsequently constructed about the FE sector. In order to achieve this I made a conscious decision to concentrate on depth, and early in the research design, breadth was surrendered for this purpose, with qualitative methods being selected as the primary means used 'to gather an authentic understanding' (Silverman, 2004, p13) of the research participants' experiences. This research therefore focuses in detail on the experiences of a small number of participants in two colleges rather than a much larger survey, where such detailed information would be difficult to obtain within the timeframe of my research project.

This research, begins with a 'starting point where some things are taken for granted, taken as understood' (Standish, 2002, p216). The position that is taken as understood is that race not only exists as a perception but is a concept which is translated into a reality through the:

> *social discourses (that) are enmeshed in lived experience and institutional power relations that have emotional, material and embodied consequences for individual groups.*

> Gunaratnam, 2003, p7

As such, race and ethnicity are powerful determinants of the experiences of Black people. Equally, race and ethnicity's unwanted progeny, prejudice and racism, have a significant impact on the lives of Black people in the United Kingdom in general, influencing every

aspect of their experience including education. However, in spite of such high profile cases as the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent MacPherson inquiry there still are:

> *difficulties in getting some schools individually or locally to acknowledge and tackle racism even when local education authorities have sought to persuade them to do so.*

> Macpherson, 1999, paragraph 6.56

Consequently in some schools and colleges there exists a situation where there is a failure:

> *to provide an appropriate professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin (which) can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.*

> ibid, paragraph 6.34

The experience of Black males in education has been well documented in the literature, which provides details of underachievement of Black males in the statutory sector and information on the marginalisation and the hostile educational environment experienced by this group in both the statutory and HE sectors (see Chapter 4 *Literature Review*). This information is accepted as the starting point for my research and the contribution that my research will make to the existing knowledge is to determine specifically if this same situation of low academic achievement and hostility also exists in the FE sector as exemplified by two FE colleges. Using the information gained in this way I then offer suggestions on practices which may help to promote the successful education of Black males in education in Chapter 8 *Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations*.

Two contrasting Midlands colleges were selected and used for this research, one urban with an ethnically mixed and diverse client group, and the other suburban with a largely white client group. Students studying at different levels and on different programmes were invited to participate in the research, to capture as wide a range of experience as possible within the colleges and to give a deeper understanding of life within an FE college for Black males.

When considering the most appropriate methods to use for the study, it was important that I chose methods which preserved the integrity of the study and provided me with the best possible chance of collecting data that would provide useful insights and develop my own understanding of this area. It was also important that the methods and techniques I used

'should be flexible' (Holroyd, 2001, p1) and sufficiently responsive to accommodate the broad aims of the study (see Chapter 1, *Introduction*) as well as including any unexpected or unforeseen developments (Homan, 2002). During the course of my research I believed it was likely that I could 'expect the unexpected' and I needed research methods that would facilitate and accommodate this.

As well as recording events and incidents, the research methods needed to provide a vehicle for the intangible and ephemeral qualities of feelings and emotions to be captured, for these feelings would influence how the research participants viewed FE and would be a significant feature in their construction of reality while studying at FE. Before moving on to describe these methods, I will first consider the ethical issues which are related to this research and which underpinned and informed the entire research process.

5.3.1 Ethical Issues

I was presented with a number of implicit and explicit ethical dilemmas when investigating my research question. I did not initially identify all of these, as some dilemmas only became apparent to me as I have revisited and reflected on the research process and the research outcomes. In this regard, the work could be framed as continuously evolving, and it is likely that I will never reach a final end point in my reflections and considerations. This in itself is an ethical dilemma, as the most I can claim for this particular piece of research is that I have considered *some* of the issues, and it will never be possible for me to state that I have considered *all* of the issues. In this respect, the research is, and will remain, incomplete. My purpose in identifying the ethical issues of which I am aware at this point, is to highlight these issues and to discuss the approaches I used to try and reduce any potential negative impacts these issues could have had.

The question of what ethical issues needed to be considered was further compounded by the exploratory nature of the work in that some of the outcomes or findings could not have been initially anticipated. Indeed, both myself as a researcher, and the research participants were in some regards entering this endeavour blind without knowledge of some of the potential outcomes. I cannot argue that the informed consent given by the research participants at the start of the process discharges the ethical obligations placed upon me as a researcher to behave sensitively and to maintain the integrity and interests of the research participants for 'if one whose business is research cannot foresee consequences, it is arguably unfair to expect such foresight' from others (Homan, 2004, p36). While I was unable to predict or

protect against all possible ethical hazards, some protection against potential difficulties was provided by the right of the participants to withdraw at any stage, or to decline to become involved in the research at all, and participants were informed that 'consent (was) not a "once and for all" obligation' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p75). Participants were very much encouraged to view this research as an elective venture in which their engagement, although essential, was not in any way compulsory.

A fundamental issue that needed to be addressed was the ethical appropriateness of conducting the research in the first instance. Although I had the individual motivation for conducting the research (see Chapter 2: *Locating Myself as a Researcher*) to only consider my own needs would be exploitative of the research participants. I needed to be clear on the advantages for the research participants: what would they gain by engaging in this research? how would they benefit? In writing now I am still unable to answer these questions conclusively. However, as I reread my research journal I have recorded that after explaining the research to a potential participant he enthusiastically responded 'Yeah, I definitely want to do that' (*May 2005 Personal Research Journal*), while his colleague also nodded his assent. I have also noted that 'The first group interview with L2s went really well, very talkative and interesting things to say' (*December 2005 Personal Research Journal*). This pattern of active and enthusiastic participation was replicated throughout the focus group and individual discussions.

At first reading, the benefit here again appears to be mine, with a willing group of participants enabling me to advance my research. And yet, another interpretation is this marginalised group (or as one student described himself 'Just another failed Black boy', *December 2005 Personal Research Journal*) were being provided with an opportunity to talk with an interested third party about their experiences. Moreover this positive response could have been indicative of a wish to speak and be heard as 'there has been a tendency to treat young people as passive subjects whose opinions are peripheral to the understanding of the issues which fundamentally affect them' (Hazel, 1995, p2). Whereas for much research 'the adult status of the researcher may cause problems in eliciting and collecting' (ibid) thoughts and ideas, this group appeared to positively welcome the opportunity to be engaged in the research process and this willingness to participate enabled me to 'cross the cultural and communicative divide' (ibid) that could have existed between us, enabled me to put the research participants at the forefront. This was not a subordinate/superior relationship where

the research participants had to justify or defend their actions, but an open discussion, in which they could bring up any issues they wanted. In many ways although there was a framework for the discussions, as the students took control of and owned the agenda, it became their agenda. On reflection, I can now see that this in itself was, for the research participants, a liberating process, and a process which I believe they would have been given little opportunity to participate in within formal education settings, where more usually their experience was one of being talked at.

The venue where the discussions took place is another important issue. While it could be suggested that college is most aptly described as 'teacher-territory', the fact that these discussions took place in the college, not in their homes or in a youth club, helped to provide validity to their stories. The students' stories were no longer marginalised or at the fringes of their educational experience, but were now fore-grounded and contextually valued within an educational setting. Many of the students involved in the study had first-hand experience of individual discussions with staff, but often these had been 'problem-focussed-incident-investigations' in which they had been identified as being involved in some kind of misdemeanour. In the discussions I had with the students there was no alleged wrong doing, nor was I seeking to locate potential misbehaviour. The agenda for the research conversations was very different, and in no way was I seeking to find someone to blame for an inappropriate something. The research conversation was about *their* experience and there was no incident or event which precipitated the discussion. Although I cannot offer confirmatory evidence, I very much developed the opinion this was the first time these students had been asked to talk about their education in such a way, and this was the first time that a teacher rather than telling them about their school/college lives, or interrogating them about an alleged offence, was genuinely asking to hear about the range of their experiences as they understood them.

Consistent with American Statistical Association (1997) guidelines, and British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2004 guidelines, which acknowledge the 'use of incentives to encourage participation' (BERA, p8), all participants were financially remunerated for taking part in the research. Although BERA recognises that rewards can promote participation, this was not my primary reason for paying the research participants. Many of the research participants involved in the study either had been or were in work. All the research participants, as adults, knew and understood the value of work and their time. By paying the

research participants I wanted to send a clear signal that I valued and believed their participation to be valuable. I did not wish to do this in a nominal way, but wanted to show that engagement in this research was at least of the same value as some kinds of paid employment and in recognition of their participation I decided to pay each participant a small fee as 'participants are often paid $25 to $50 for reimbursement of their time' (American Statistical Association, 1997, p8). A separate fee was paid each time one of the participants took part in an activity related to the research, and as I decided to pay participants £10.00 per hour for their involvement, thus all research participants were paid at an hourly rate which was in excess of the current minimum wage. By paying the participants at this level I demonstrated to them that their knowledge had a tangible value. Although my decision to pay participants could be challenged on the grounds that participants might be tempted to say either that which they believed I wanted to hear, or to try and second guess some 'right answer', I am confident this was not the position, and indeed I was surprised at how little the participants understood the purpose of the research prior to our first meeting. This lack of knowledge on their part, at least provided some protection against scripted and rehearsed replies. On reflection, although the payment was of immediate benefit to the participants, from the comments made by the group members, the financial reward gained, now appears to be of secondary importance in comparison to the opportunity to voice and discuss their lives and experiences of education, in a group with other Black males. This was very clearly demonstrated by the enthusiasm with which the group engaged with discussions.

A further, unanticipated and unpredicted benefit gained by the research participants was the opportunity to discuss and network with other Black students. Although I initially tried to speak to students in existing friendship groups to try and provide mutual peer support from other participants, this arrangement was not always possible, and on occasions I had to bring together diverse students who were not known to each other. This was a decision based on expediency, and can be fairly criticised as it 'failed to place the research participants, rather that the researcher, at the centre of the design' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p68). Although recognising the potential difficulties that this could have caused in terms of group cohesion, I still pursued this course of action in order to make as much progress with data collection as I swiftly could. However, these negative events did not transpire and instead of discord among the participants the groups worked together productively, affirming a common Black consciousness, or as one student succinctly commented:

I walked into this room with three friends; I've walked out with eight.
14 December, 2006 Personal Research Journal

The question of participant exploitation is not only critical in itself, but also had particular relevance to the privileged insider position that I occupy. This is a key issue to be considered, for the insider that becomes exploitative in their work, loses the right to present themselves as a champion for a disempowered or marginalised group for they can no longer suggest that the research is for the benefit of the participants. In effect the researcher is using the research participants for their own gains and advantage. Within the context of this research, however, the participant feedback indicates, I was able to use my insider position in a facilitating capacity, and rather than being exploitative or abusive, the process appeared to be an empowering and enabling process for the participants, allowing a group which has been described as 'emotionally shut-down Black males' (hooks, 2001, p42) to 'give voice to emotional needs' (ibid, p29) in a supportive environment.

At this point I need to provide further information regarding the issue of informed consent. This research has conformed to BERA guidelines in relation to obtaining informed consent and all participants have been directly consulted with regards to their involvement. However, some of the participants, although not children, were minors (under the age of 18) and BERA guidelines state that when working with young people 'researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (eg parents)' (2004, p7) before beginning the research. This approach was not pursued as all the young men who took part in the study, while not opposed to their families knowing of their involvement, considered themselves sufficiently adult to make their own decisions on whether to take part or not. I wished to respect this position and considered the participants to be more young adults rather than minors. However, as I assured anonymity for all research participants, the issue of identification of any of the participants (including the minors) was not an issue of concern for this particular research. Consequently, I made no attempt to contact the participants' families or homes to seek agreements for their son's/dependent's involvement in the research, although I acknowledge the ethical nature of this decision could be challenged by those with parental responsibility for the research participants.

A further key ethical issue that I needed to consider within the context of this research was the level of participant involvement. Good research practice requires that information is

shared with the research participants and researchers 'give full information to subjects' (Silverman, 2004, p270). This is often achieved by providing the research participants with copies of the research transcripts. A dilemma raised by this approach was although the research participants had been willing contributors to focus groups, individual interviews and other research activities, they indicated this was the extent of their involvement and that they did not require further information, or wish to be involved in the proof-reading and checking of transcripts; and in some respects this level of participant trust placed a heightened onus on me as a researcher to fulfil my obligation to behave in an ethical manner. Yet, to fulfil the ethical requirement of 'nothing about us, without us', the slogan of disability campaigners, the requirement to share the findings with the participants was an issue that *had* to be addressed, for 'it is the *right* of children and young people to have a say about thing that concerns them (Thomson, 2008, p1). And, if I failed to do so I would have been acting unethically, and would have left my research findings open to the real challenge of researcher ventriloquy, 'where the researched are merely the vehicle for the researcher's message' (McNamee, 2004, p6).

The eventual solution to this difficult situation was a compromise position. As the group had already demonstrated a willingness to be involved in group activities and had further shown a willingness to mix with other Black students who had participated in the study, I arranged a series of group validation meetings, where I had intended to bring all the research participants together to discuss the research findings. In these validation meetings I gave the research participants a written summary of the research findings to discuss and check. Unfortunately, due to the timings of the meetings (13 students had by then exited either into work, into higher education or some other destination, and under the data protection act I could not access college records to confirm their whereabouts) only seven participants, out of a original cohort of 29 students (24%) were able to attend. However, what was significant at this meeting was all students confirmed the accuracy of the records I had made and endorsed my interpretations and records of their discussions, commenting that 'you have to be Black to understand it' (*Personal Research Journal 14 December, 2006*). This final comment also shows that 'without recourse to mimicry' (Pendlebury and Enslin, 2004, p61), I was able to demonstrate 'the special insights of the native speaker into the practices and understandings of the community' (ibid), and had been able to record these, so avoiding the malpractice of ventriloquy.

The ethical concerns described above were even more complicated for the second participant college. In part this was caused by the distance which was created in a variety of different ways between me and the research participants. I could still legitimately claim to be a member of the Black community, but in addition to the features which made me an outsider discussed in Chapter 2 *Locating Myself as a Researcher*, I was also outside of *their* college community. In the first college, although not personally known to all the research participants, I was at least an identifiable face from within the college, consequently my initial contact with the research participants was facilitated to some degree by my institutional familiarity. This was not the case in the second participant college. Further difficulties were created as I was only in the second college for a short period of time, and therefore lacked the opportunity to establish and build a relationship with the research participants. As an initial concern with this work was would the students be willing to talk about their experiences this position could have been exacerbated in the second college, where my unfamiliarity made me an unknown and potentially untrustworthy stranger.

Although, not claiming a complete resolution of these difficulties I approached and managed them in the following way to try and reduce any negative effects. In the first instance I had been able to refine the research tools in the first participant college. This meant that although I would still be a stranger to the group, I was aware of the potential difficulties created by the research instruments themselves, and could guard against these. Additionally, whereas in the first college, I had used a number of different classroom and other settings to work with the participants, for the second college, I arranged to carry out all the interviews in the college student centre. This, I hoped, neutral location would be 'helpful for avoiding either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building' (Gibbs, 1997, p4) and would further help to put the participants at their ease.

A further particular issue for the second college was the manner in which participants were recruited. At the first college the lines of communication between me and the students were short, and after a courtesy conversation with their tutors, I was rapidly able to meet with the students, and discuss directly with them whether or not they wished to be involved in the research. Again, it was not possible to achieve this level of informality in the second college, and in order to gain access I had to go through the college vice-principal. Although supportive of the work, her position as vice-principal raised a further concern in that would participants feel obliged to take part because the vice-principal 'had told them so' or then to say what they believed was expected of them rather than what they actually thought? Again,

I cannot be certain that I was able to fully address these concerns, and indeed, as a result of the low level of student participation (only 3 students eventually took part in the research, which in some respects removed the fear that participants had been coerced into taking part), I believe that accessing students via the vice principal may have been a damaging and unhelpful strategy. However, in an attempt to reduce any negative effects for the few students who did participate I took the following precautionary measures.

Firstly, before beginning the research work I introduced myself. I did this in order to affirm my credentials as a researcher, and not as a tool of the college management. I then explored with students what they understood, and what they had been told about the work. Again this was a necessary step as I needed to be certain that there were no misunderstandings concerning the nature of the research work. I then explained my perspective on the research, how I intended to work, what would happen with the information collected and what might be the potential benefits for them as participants. At this stage I reaffirmed it was their decision whether or not they chose to take part and they could discontinue at any time. Nor if they decided to participate in the research, did they have to address all the areas covered in the research exercise. Only after I had received positive confirmation from the participants that they understood the purpose of the research and were willing to participate, did I proceed with the research. Such precautions were particularly necessary for the second college as I needed to be confident that students had not been 'rendered powerless to refuse' (Homan, 2004, p25) by the college management team.

A final, although by no means insignificant ethical issue that needs to be addressed in this section, are the personal connections I have made with this research (see Chapter 2, *Locating Myself as a Researcher*). I believe it has been necessary to provide this information because it assists the reader in making their own connections with the research. Rather than 'contaminating' the thesis with an undue personal bias, my personal data supports the reader to better understand my initial motivation for engaging with and completing the research. In the same way as my personal presentation at the two research colleges served, to a degree, as a bridge between me and the research participants (also discussed in Chapter 2) I believe that the personal information I have provided will lead the reader towards a better understanding of my research. It is possible the some readers may find such a style inappropriate and unnecessarily personal, however, I *am* connected to this research and not to declare this would be deceitful. Although this is not participant research, I am an integral part of the

research and it would be difficult for the reader to have full understanding of the findings without this information.

The ethical issues and concerns raised by this research are not easily and simply addressed for it is possible to make claims and counter-claims regarding any number of these issues. Nor can I be certain that the practices I adopted were adequate safeguards to protect the research 'participants against any potentially harmful effects of participating' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p81). However, I do claim that my awareness of the possible hazards in the research produced a heightened personal responsibility for the way in which I conducted the research and the way in which I worked with the research participants. Accordingly I continually strove to ensure that I displayed a:

> *commitment to, for example: sensitive and reflexive understanding of the experiences of others; respect for others as persons; listening to others in conditions of respect and care; mutuality of benefit and gratefulness for giving relationships; openness to criticism and the exposure of prejudice.*

> Bridges, 2004, p86

I will never be certain that I adequately achieved this standard, and although I cannot conclusively know that all participants who took part in this research were satisfied that the research was conducted in an ethical manner, I can be confident the way I carried out the research 'was conducted within an ethic of respect for the person' (BERA, 2004, p5) and that I had taken 'all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion and to put them at their ease' (ibid, p7) during the course of the research. In this way I believe I did as much as I was able to protect the interests and well being of the participants and I did all I could to protect the participants from 'emotional or other harm' (ibid, p8). In this section I have specifically addressed ethical issues, concerns and problems. Further information on more general problems associated with my research are considered in section 5.8 *Issues Presented by the Research Process*.

5.4 Using Qualitative Methods

While phenomenology provides a mechanism for unpicking 'the incessant tangle or reflexivity of action, situation, and reality of being in the world' (Orleans, 1991, p3), it does not and cannot prescribe the methods to achieve this (refer to section *5.2.1 The Research*

Question and Phenomenology earlier in this chapter for a full discussion). Indeed, it is likely that 'there is no single method that will suffice for all enquiries' (Holroyd, 2001, p1). For my research it became clear to me that I needed to use a variety of methods which would allow me to investigate my question more fully.

Ethnography is essentially 'designed for discovery' (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p2). Historically, ethnography, 'comes from social anthropology' (Punch, 2005, p 149) and is designed to 'investigate an institution, group, or setting that is relatively under researched and about which relatively little is known' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p171), with the aim of providing information about the 'social and cultural life of communities, institutions and other settings' (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p1). In the past, anthropologists, achieved this aim by immersing themselves in the life of a community 'for up to 2 or 3 years, learning about as many aspects of community life as possible' (ibid, p4). In furtherance of their work anthropologists and ethnographers would employ a number of different data collection techniques, and where appropriate creating:

> *locally appropriate aids to data collection or instruments that (were) effective in building a picture, narrative, story or theory of local culture*

> ibid, p3

Ethnography is thus not a single-feature approach, but can be considered a 'package' which employs multiple techniques in the process of discovery, and, it provides itself with the licence to invent new methods of data collection if, and when, necessary. In contemporary times for researchers using ethnographic methods, the luxury of spending 'years in a single site' (ibid, p5) is simply often too costly and time consuming. Instead, 'nowadays ethnographers work for shorter periods of time in communities of varying size and complexity' (ibid, p5) and focus on a 'particular aspect or dimension of culture' (ibid, p5). My own research has element of such an ethnographic approach. By being employed in one of my principal research colleges for 15 years I had the specific opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of the culture of one of the research colleges, and by working in FE for this same time period I was simultaneously able to develop a general understanding of the sector, its mores and norms. By the same token, this level of exposure, allowed me to become 'immersed', to a degree, in the culture of FE where I conducted my research.

Characteristic features of ethnography, created by this immersion process are that studies are necessarily completed in natural settings. Ethnographic studies do not attempt to re-locate the research participants to other settings, rather, the work occurs in situ, with the participants carrying out their usual activities in the usual locations where they operate. In this way the researcher aims to build up through inductive and interactive data collection techniques, an 'accurate reflection of the participants' perspectives and behaviours' (ibid, p9). A further consequence of working in this way is that the ethnographer 'must become intimately involved with members of the community' (ibid, p10). The intimacy developed is thus not an artificial or enforced process, but is a by-product of becoming an integral part of a community. This too was a further feature of my research, and all the research and all the research activities took place within the 'natural setting' of the college environment, where I was part of the established landscape and understood the prevailing culture.

Accepting the above as characteristic features of ethnographic research, I decided that my own research was ideally suited to using ethnographic methods, as it bore strong connections to this way of working. I had worked in the one of the research colleges for over 15 years, and while not claiming that my own study lasted this long (the actual study lasted 24 months from January 2005 to December 2006), this level of work place contact allowed me to build up a relationship with Black students in college over successive years, similar to the immersion strategies adopted by ethnographers. Indeed some of the students who participated in the study were personally known to me as they had stayed in the college for several years, sometimes leaving to begin work and then returning in a part-time capacity. Consequently, I became known to the Black students in college by reputation, as returning students would identify me to newcomers, and point me out as a 'safe[3]' teacher.

Although it could be suggested that this level of familiarity with the research participants might contaminate the data collection process, as participants may be tempted to try and please me by saying and doing what they believed I wanted, my reputation and my positioning as a Black member of staff, allowed me to develop the 'special kind of friendship' (ibid, p10) necessary for ethnographic studies. While at one level this relationship facilitated data collection processes, it also raised other issues in terms of was I firstly a member of the Black community, working as a teacher in a college, or was I firstly a teacher who happened to be Black? This important issue of essentially 'who's side was I

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[3] Safe – youth slang for a person who can be trusted

on?' is more fully explored section *2.1.2 The Insider/Outsider Dilemma*.   However, it is at this juncture I assert that this closeness of the relationship aided the data collection processes, so that the participants were willing to make frank and honest disclosures during the data collection stage.

The final feature that made my research suited to an ethnographic approach was I did not limit myself to a single data collection technique, and I adopted multiple techniques, as well as creating bespoke research tools during the course of the research to assist data collection. For these collective reasons, it is my assertion that this research was wholly compatible with and ideally suited to ethnographic methods of data collection.

5.5 Selecting and Developing Research Techniques and Tools

In designing this research, I felt an ethical and a personal obligation to give as accurate a representation as I could of the experiences of the of the research participants, and although much research into the lives of 'adolescents has traditionally neglected the views and voices of the young people themselves'(Hazel, 1995, p2) I wished to avoid the approach where 'students as authors appear only rarely' (Erikson and Schultz, 1992, p480) and to ensure that the participants' voices were clearly fore-grounded and heard by both me as the researcher, and any future prospective audiences (see *5.2.2 The Significance of the Narrative Dimension* earlier in this chapter). Moreover, I recognised that the research participants were 'capable of forming their own views' (BERA, 2004, p7) and were entitled to 'express their views freely' (ibid), for 'on the topic of student experience, students themselves are the ultimate insiders and experts' (Erikson and Shultz, 1992, p480), and consequently are in the best position to describe their own experience and lives. Furthermore I was seeking to distance myself from a research tradition which has produced a 'systematic silencing of the student voice' (ibid, p481).

Following the theme that more than one methodology was needed to fully investigate the research question I also needed multiple methods to meet the challenge of capturing and representing the experiences of the research participants, and consistent with the approaches used in ethnography, I found I needed to use (and on occasion develop) complementary techniques to collect the data I needed to support my research.

5.5.1   Personal Approaches to the Data Collection Process

The research group I had chosen to work with were Black males, most of whom were under the age of 25. As I explained in Chapter 2 *Locating Myself as a Researcher* there were significant aspects in which I could be considered to be different to, and set apart from the research group: age, gender and employment status are just three of the features that separated me from the research participants. Consequently, in the initial construction stage of the research I had significant concerns that the research participants may not, as a result of these differences, be willing to talk to me, or to take part in the research at all. To try and reduce the likelihood of non-participation it became necessary for me to build 'safeguards' into my research design.

Within the first urban college lines of communication between myself and the research participants were very short, and after a courtesy request to the students' personal tutors, I was quickly able to quickly establish contact with the research participants. Unfortunately, this was not possible for the second college, and measures taken to address this difficultly are described in section *5.3.1, Ethical Issues*. When first meeting the participants, I informed them their participation was entirely voluntary, and in accordance with the BERA ethical guidelines they had the right 'to withdraw from the research for any or no reason and at any time '(2004, p6) without any reason being given. No students were forced or coerced at any stage to take part in the research. This was an important message to convey, not only to meet my ethical obligations as a researcher, but also because some of the students might have believed failure to comply with a request from a member of staff, could have reflected badly on them, possibly even affecting their course grades.

This first meeting with the students also provided me with an opportunity to explain 'the process in which they (were) to be engaged, including why their participation (was) necessary' (ibid), their likely time commitment should they choose to become involved, what would happen to the data generated, and how participants would be compensated for their time. Issues of self- and chosen identity were also raised at this stage with the participants. This was an important step, as prior to this initial meeting, all communication had been via a third party, and it is possible that misunderstandings may have occurred, and participants may not have fully understood what they were potentially agreeing to.

To promote dialogue between myself and the research participants, I needed to draw considerably on my own personal and life experiences, to ensure that there was open

communication between us. At the time of completing the research I had been teaching for 20 years working with students from mixed cultural groups and genders aged from 5 through to 80, and had spent 15 of these years in FE colleges working with students aged from 14 to 40. I was trained in the use of counselling skills, having worked for five years as a part time youth worker, regularly sat as a magistrate and continued to parent a teenage son. This range of life, work, personal and other experiences has provided me with many different models of communication, ranging from a controlling authoritarian through to a concerned parent. My concern for this research was to find a model of communication that was respectful of the research participants and demonstrated my interest in their views. The model also needed to shift the focus away from me as a talker so that they as the research participants were doing most of the talking, either to me or with each other. Above all, my principal concern, was the communication style used needed to fit with the work being completed, and that the participants should be enabled to engage in an open dialogue, which as far as possible emphasised their voices.

To achieve this, I adopted an open conversational style, which utilised the skills I had developed as a youth worker and a teacher, and was both inviting and participatory. I used this approach partly because this was consistent with my usual style of communicating, and so would appear genuine to the participants and partly because my counselling background had shown that this method was useful in putting people from a variety of cultural groups, at their ease. A further advantage of this style of communication was it established our working relations on a more equal footing, of co-participants engaged in a shared enterprise, instead of a hierarchical tutor/student relationship.

It was also important that what was said was accurately captured. Consequently, all dialogic exchanges, after the first initial explanatory meeting, whether individual or group meetings were tape recorded. This was a very conscious decision, as I wanted to preserve all the words of the participants, and 'the obvious advantage of taping interviews is accuracy of recording' (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte, 1999, p145). The advantages of taping the discussions far outweighed the difficulties of tape recording, for example cost, time for transcription and potential equipment failure, as it provided much greater certainty of keeping the participants' words in the form in which they were spoken. I rejected the alternative of note taking because if its potential to distract:

the interviewer from the openness of direct communication with the interviewee; it is also difficult to write quickly-and legibly- enough to record everything an informant says.

ibid, p144

All discussions and interviews took place on college premises for both the first and the second college. I took this decision as the work centred on the students' experiences while in college, and it was the one venue which all students were familiar with and could gain easy access to. Although the actual sites for the discussions were not completely ideal, as these mostly took part in classrooms or student centres, by the time the discussions took place, all students had been in college for some time, and so had developed some familiarity with the various locations. College was also the venue where the students had formed their friendship groups with the other students, and so in some respects could be regarded as a social venue.

In managing and handling the data, it was critical that I represented the participants' realities and that I did not superimpose my own experiences or beliefs. To do this it was important that I allowed the participants to represent themselves in their own words and that in processing the data, I did not impose my preferred version of reality. I achieved this in four key ways. Firstly, I made verbatim records of the interviews and discussions that took place, which were captured via tape recordings. Secondly I took my translation of the participants' discussions back to the participants so that they had an opportunity to check the accuracy of my representations. Thirdly I ensured that I remained as silent as possible in all discussions with the participants so that there was good opportunity for their voices to be heard, and finally, at all times, I reminded myself that my primary task, as a researcher, was to accurately capture the participants' stories, so that these stories could then be told to a wider audience. These strategies enabled me to remain faithful to a phenomenological approach and during data analysis, by bracketing off my own reality, I was able to accurately represent the lives' of the participants.

The end participant sample consisted of 26 students from the first urban college and 3 students from the second college. Students from the first college took part in eight separate focus group sessions and six individual interviews, while three individual interviews were carried out at the second college. In total, therefore, 29 students participated in the research from October 2005 to December 2006, a period of 15 months. In the next sections of this

chapter, 5.5.2 to 5.5.6 inclusive, I will give further details on the specific research tools used to investigate the students' life stories.

5.5.2   Using Focus Groups

The Focus Group was the principal method of data generation used in this research.   In order to collect candid information it was necessary that students spoke openly and freely. To promote this level of dialogue a focus group technique was employed, which placed me in the role of facilitator and allowed participants to discuss with peers a variety of defining categories regarding FE. A focus group technique was selected in preference to group interviews as a starting point for the research as they are 'in depth qualitative interviews with a small number of carefully selected people' which generate 'vivid and rich descriptions' (American Statistical Association, 1997, p1) and are a technique to 'solicit views, ideas and other information' (USAID, 1996, p1). As such this technique was very suited to the open-ended exploratory nature of the research. The focus group technique provided a mechanism for the students to be brought together in small groups to discuss issues and to 'tap into human tendencies where attitudes and perceptions are developed through interaction with other people' (Lewis, 1995, p2). I further favoured this technique, as I believed that it provided an opportunity for the participants 'to be valued as experts' (Gibbs, 1997, p3). Moreover by bringing the participants together in small groups they were able to give mutual support to each other and were more easily able to take control of the discussions, with the freedom to bring up any matters they believed to be significant.

However, after exploratory work, I discovered the traditional format of focus groups where participants with only minimal guidance collectively generated responses to issues, did not appear to be well suited to this cohort, who seemed to require further structure, before they could engage in in-depth discussions. Indeed, 'focus groups favour extraverts' (Coventry University, online) and may not readily suit participants who, although not lacking in things to say, may have difficulties in starting to express themselves. As a result of three separate pilot groups carried out from January until April 2005, with male students of a similar age and social background, the final research tool produced a modified focus group format in which participants discussed prompt cards which were discussed under a variety of different headings relating to their experience of FE (see appendix 2). To prevent the difficulty of me 'putting words into the participants mouths' suggestions relating to their experiences were, in the first instance, principally drawn from the 'Report on the Achievement of Black Males in

Schools' completed by the London Development Agency, in 2004. However, as a result of completing the pilot studies, I identified that not all the ideas and headings I had selected appeared relevant to the participants. Consequently it was necessary to revise the prompt cards to include additional ideas generated by the students who participated in the pilot studies. The main source of ideas for the prompt cards was therefore primarily student generated and the prompt cards were consequently phrased in accessible 'student talk'. Only later after reviewing the range of suggestions, and for completeness, did I decide to add some minimal suggestions of my own. The prompt cards each centred on a particular topic concerning FE, and participants were asked to discuss and express their experiences under these topic headings.

While it could be argued the topic headings and the prompt cards pre-determined the scope of the discussion, 'by its very nature focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined (Gibbs, 1997, p3). The topic headings and prompt cards used were produced as a direct consequence of the pilot studies and were a specific tool to promote active participant engagement. This more structured format was needed to address the concern that 'the initial question seemed too broad and too intangible for the students to grasp' and 'the group did not really work as a focus group and did not draw from each other or bounce ideas off each other' (*26 January 2005, Personal Research Journal*). The modified approach where the participants had tangible artefacts to hold to focus their attentions produced a far more positive outcome and I have recorded for the subsequent pilot studies that 'they couldn't stop talking' (*13 February 2005, Personal Research Journal*), and for the research proper that the modified format 'really do(es) work well' (*15 October, 2005, Personal Research Journal*).

Consequently the core framework tested in the pilot studies was adopted for all subsequent focus group interviews. This change in working meant that the re-designed focus group technique operated far more effectively, and instead of me doing excessive amounts of talking I was able to fulfil a facilitator's role, and 'to keep the group focussed and generate a lively and productive discussion' (American Statistical Association, 1997, p5). Only occasionally did members of the group need to refer to me when they did not understand a word or phrase recorded on the prompt cards. Although it could be suggested by modifying the format of the focus group, the validity of the data I collected could be challenged, such modifications are not unusual and 'focus group interviewing today takes on many different forms as researchers modify procedures to suit their own needs' (Lewis, 1995, p1).

5.5.3 Using Individual Interviews

I supplemented the information collected from the focus groups with additional individual interviews carried out with a selection of the focus group members. This choice was made at the point of the focus group discussions, and related to the points that group members had raised during the course of the focus group discussion. It did not relate to the courses the participants were studying, their ages, home circumstances or any other categorising feature of their life outside of FE. The choice was solely dependent on the points participants had raised during the course of the focus group discussion, and provided an opportunity for detailed examination of issues that had surfaced during that discussion.

Accepting that 'the power relations which structure interview settings are never more obvious than when the biographies of the interviewer and the interviewee(s) are inscribed in different social practices and discourses' (Scott and Usher, 1999, p114) and that this 'issue may be exacerbated, for example, when we study groups with whom we do not share membership' (Miller and Glassner in Silverman, 1998, p101), I decided that there was sufficient common ground between me and most of the research participants to make individual interviews worthwhile. I shared a common heritage with all the participants, and like most of the participants I had personal experience of being schooled in the UK. Moreover I had a continued understanding of some of the issues of being a member of a minority community. Consequently although I did not share a complete insider position with the research participants the 'social distance' (ibid) between myself and the participants was not so great that it hindered discussion. The individual interviews had further value as it allowed:

> *interviewees to talk about the subject in terms of their own frame of reference. In doing so, the method enables the interviewer to maximise her or his understanding of the respondent's point of view.*

> Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p161

Having established initial contact and met with the group for a focus group discussion, the selected group members were agreeable to the idea of an individual interview to explore issues in more depth. This was an important aspect of the data collection, for although the focus group had the advantage of acting in a mutually supportive way for the participants, it was not possible to tell how much of the information shared was designed to impress either me or their peers. For, as noted by Miles and Huberman, weaker data is produced when the

'respondent is in the presence of others, in group setting' (1994, p268). The individual interview removed this potential peer pressure, and provided the opportunity for students to make statements without the need to impress their friends. It is possible that the students may have still wished to impress me, but as I was an outsider in many regards, and was not in direct competition with the student group in terms of status or profile, nor did I control any material resources that they may have wanted, the need to impress me was reduced as I was neither sufficiently important nor powerful to warrant this response.

I chose an informal, semi-structured format for the individual interviews so that 'to all intents and purposes (the interview was) like a normal conversation' (Bartlett and Burton, 2007, p43). Such an approach provided an opportunity for an in-depth exploration of issues where questions could be 'fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee, and can be enhanced by probes' (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte, 1999, p149). Essentially I used the individual interviews as a mechanism to dig deeper into the questions and issues that had been raised in the focus groups and to determine the essence of some of the statements made. A skeleton framework of 10 questions was used as a guide for the individual interviews to provide consistency across the sample group, and although further probing questions were individualised, all participants were asked the same common core of questions (see appendix 1 for questions used). Again, all interviews were tape recorded, and later transcribed.

5.5.4 Using Observations

I supported the data produced by focus group and individual interviews by collecting additional information through observations of the same group in both academic and social settings in the first urban college. I completed the observations at a distance to prevent candidates developing a feeling of being closely scrutinised and possibly playing a role to satisfy an audience. Earlier consent gained from participants for this activity prevented me acting as a 'spy' or intruder and put me more in the position of a 'fly on the wall'. 6.5 hours of teaching based observations were completed, together with numerous casual observations of the students as they moved around the college, in the corridors, the canteen, and college open spaces. Observations were naturalistic in that 'the situation being observed (was) not contrived for research purposes' (Punch, 2005, 179). I carried out observations as a way of matching what the participants said, with what they actually did, and as a way of obtaining a 'more valid and holistic picture of society than that which could be acquired by remaining

true to only one set of methods' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p19) in order to gain a more 'complete overview of the matter under investigation' (ibid, p21). Observation data was recorded in a field notebook.

Typically in ethnographic studies, ethnographers 'spend the first days and months of a field experience getting orientated' (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte, 1999, p96). For my research, this concern was overcome, by the fact that I had been based in the first college for 15 years, and so was familiar with the terrain, as were numbers of the students who took part in the research. However, to allow students to become familiar with any new tutors they might have, classroom observations began in February 2006, when all the students involved in the research had been in college a minimum of five months and to provide an opportunity for the participants to become orientated to their surroundings. Social space observations of the students occurred from the beginning of September 2005 until mid-December 2005 on an informal and ad-hoc basis. My access to the observation venues was further facilitated by the relative ease with which I was 'accepted into the situation' (ibid, p93) due to my position as a staff member and the common features shared between myself and the research participants in terms of 'language, class background, manner...race and ethnicity' (ibid, p93).

5.5.5 Using Photo-Records

'The use of photographs is a well-established ethnographic practice' (Walker and Weidel, 1985, p191) and supplies a means for research participants to provide 'expert testimony about their experiences, associations and lifestyles' (Thomson, 2008, p1). My use of this data collection tool, is at a tangent to the way photographs are usually used to collect ethnographic evidence. For this research, I did not take photographs of the participants while they were at college, but I wished to use photographs in a different way. These are not photographs which are '"illustrative of literary themes" practice' (Walker and Weidel, 1985, p193), but were a means of accessing 'rich (and mostly untapped) possibilities' (Mitchell, 2011, p36). Themes and meanings that may not have been readily apparent through the other research techniques. To this end, I gave 4 of the research participants disposable 'point and shoot cameras' (ibid, p51), with a single instruction that they were to use the cameras to record images of 'what life in FE meant to them'.

Participants could take as many or as few pictures as they wished, and could request a second camera if they chose, but each image they photographed needed to have some significance and meaning for them relating to their time in FE. In this instance, photographs were not

being taken as a documentary record; rather the participants were selecting images which they believed symbolised lives in a FE college. Photographs were not exclusively being used as a literal record of events, but were being used in an interpretative sense by the participants to represent how they felt about, and experienced their time in FE. This data has not been collected by experienced researchers and it could, therefore, be suggested that the images may lack refinement. However, it provided a different and further means of gaining deeper understanding of the participants' experience, and a mechanism for surfacing ideas and themes that it might have been taboo for the participants to discuss in an open forum.

Because 'an image can be read in multiple ways' (Thomson, 2008, p10) after participants had taken their photographs and these had been developed, all participants had an individual debriefing meeting with me where they discussed and explained (but not justified) the images they had taken, spelling out the importance or significance of each of their selected images, particularly as images taken by young people 'may not be amenable to straightforward adult meanings' (ibid). The photographs were not used in a diary sense, where the participants had to make a daily record of activities, but were used as a tool to identify and select images that symbolised FE. For this part of the research participants recorded 79 different images. A discussion of the significance of these images is integrated into the themed findings in Chapter 6, *Research Findings*. A selection of the images chosen by the research participants is provided in appendix 3.

5.5.6 Using Numerical Data

I obtained LSC data on the academic achievement of students categorised by ethnicity and by age bracket for the first urban college. Unfortunately, although this data shows achievement according to ethnicity, it is not disaggregated by gender, and the achievement of Black males and Black females is shown together. However, the data is still useful as it shows the overall achievement of the group in a college wide context and achievement in relation to their white peers. This data is used as a separate theme to discuss the students experiences and is detailed in section *6.9 Course Achievement Data* in the next chapter.

5.6 Methods of Data Analysis

Analysing data is a key part of the research process. It is at this stage that I was able to start making sense of the data, beyond my initial 'gut' feelings. At this stage I was able to challenge, and in some instances shed, preconceived ideas and notions I may have held about

the participants' experiences.   In this way I was able to start to piece together the separate pieces of information that had been assembled and to start to draw meaning from the information that had been collected. As I used a variety of different research techniques for the research I needed to use a variety of different methods of data analysis. In this section I will explain the processes and procedures I used to analyse the collected data.

5.6.1 Data Generated through Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

All interview data collected was interrogated to identify deeper meaning beyond my first responses that occurred in the initial stages of data collection. All tape recordings were firstly transcribed and then typed. At this stage the data was analysed to produce categories, themes and patterns by:

> *culling for meaning from the words and actions of the participants in the study... by identifying the smaller units of meaning in the data, which later serve(d) as the basis for defining larger categories of meaning.*

> Mayykut and Morehouse, 1999, p128

In this way, through 'a process of inductive reasoning' (ibid) both indigenous-typologies, 'those created and expressed by participants' (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p154) and analyst- typologies, 'those created by the researcher that are grounded in the data but not necessarily used explicitly by participants' (ibid) were produced by sifting the data for 'recurring words, phrases and topics' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1999, p133). The key themes that were produced by this process are identified and discussed in detail in the next chapter, *Research Findings from the Two FE Colleges*.

 As the final set of transcribed interviews ran to over 200 pages of text, I had to create 'a formal coding system' (Schensul, LeCompte, Natasi and Borgatti, 1999, p108), which I applied in a traditional fashion to both interview transcripts and fieldnotes using a series of coloured highlighters. I chose a traditional approach, as opposed to a computer programme, for two primary reasons. The first reason was the format of the data. While the tape recorded focus group discussions and the individual interviews had all been transcribed and typed up, this did not apply to the field notes, and could not apply to the photographic data. The data was thus not available in a consistent format. Secondly, although by listening to the tapes and conducting the interviews I had developed through an inductive process, a sense of what the participants meant through their choice of words, body language and emphases, this

information could not readily be incorporated into a transcript. Any computer programme would, therefore, effectively be analysing incomplete data. It was only by replaying the tape-recordings, re-reading the transcripts and effectively re-living my exchanges with the research participants that I was able to begin to make sense of the data. This sense-making was also informed by a common shared understanding based on a common cultural heritage, and in my research it became clear to me that 'the participants seem(ed) to gain comfort from their own knowledge and the common ground held with the adult researcher' (Hazel, 1995, p4). A computer programme could not bring this level of understanding to the data analysis process.

The data analysis procedure was a multistage process and as the data was revisited and reinterpreted, new themes and ideas emerged. This analysis revealed that some of the typologies I originally believed would be pertinent to the research participants, as informed through my reading and my life experience, appeared to lack relevance, and the participants wished to discuss other areas (see paragraph on pilot studies, in section *5.5.2 Using Focus Groups,* earlier in this chapter). Therefore, in order to accommodate the participants actual responses, instead of a preconceived notion of likely responses, and in an effort to remain responsive and alert to the views and feelings of the research participants (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), it became necessary for me to revisit and revise my original typologies, and to produce a more germane set of categories for the final version of the modified focus group format used in this study. The table below shows my original researcher generated themes (first column), the revised/new themes produced through inductive reasoning and analysis (second column), and the origin of each of these themes (third column) produced from the focus groups and individual interviews.

Table 5: Research Themes

Original Theme	Revised/New Themes	Origin of Theme
a. Best/Worst Thing About College b. College Atmosphere c. College Description	Categories a,b,c subsumed and re-categorised as 1. The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges - revised theme	Researcher Generated
d. The College Curriculum	Category d retained as 2. The College Curriculum - original theme	Researcher Generated
e. Attitudes of Students f. Behaviour of Students g. Behaviour of Staff	Categories e,f, and part of g subsumed and re-categorised as 3. Support Mechanisms Available to Research	Researcher Generated

	Participants - revised theme	
---------------------------- g. Behaviour of Staff	Part Category g re-categorised as 4. Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges - new theme	Participant Generated
	5. Personal Motivation to Succeed - new theme	Participant Generated
	6. The Difference Between FE and School - new theme	Participant Generated
	7. Racism in Schools, FE and the Wider Society - new theme	Participant Generated

The first theme, institutional culture, was originally conceived as three separate themes: the best/worst thing about college, college atmosphere and college description. Although in the focus group discussions these headings were still retained to help organise the participants' views, these separations appeared artificial, and the discussions of these three areas merged and crossed over, with the participants frequently referring back to points they had raised earlier. Indeed, it appeared that it was not possible for the participants to discuss these areas as discrete entities, as they drew on each area to give deeper or more subtle interpretations of the points they wished to make. Many of these points related to the atmosphere, ethos and feelings they experienced as being part of the college community and their experience of how rules and regulations were enforced and maintained. As these categories appeared inseparable in the minds of the participants, I decided to subsume all three categories under the single heading of institutional culture.

The college curriculum, the second key theme, is noteworthy, as it was the only theme which persisted without modification. Participants were fully comfortable with the term and understood it to mean, as was intended, the taught component of their college experience.

The third category again highlighted differences between my own perspective and the participants' perspectives. I had originally believed three separate categories of student attitudes, student behaviour and staff behaviour (incorporating staff attitudes) would be the most useful and pertinent categories to use. However, once again, the resultant discussions brought these separate areas together into single theme of support mechanisms, in which the participants debated the different kinds of support they were able to access while in college.

The original theme of staff behaviour produced so much discussion that a new theme regarding staff relationships emerged, in which the participants discussed their interpersonal relationships with teaching and other staff at college. The three final themes: personal issues

regarding motivation; the difference between FE and school; and racism in schools, FE and wider society, were all generated through participant discussion and only became apparent through the data analysis process.

I use these seven key researcher-generated and participant-generated typologies (shown in the central column of the table above) together with the two other key themes of friendship and achievement as a framework, to discuss the key findings of my research in the next chapter. It needs to be remembered, however, that these typologies are, to a degree, labels of convenience, and it would be equally possible to generate other headings to discuss the ideas and thoughts that emerged through this research.

5.6.2 Data Generated through Observations and Photo-Records

The third principal data collection process was to use the ethnographic technique of observation and I observed students in both academic and in student social venues. Recorded observations of the research participants began in September 2005 and continued through to December 2006 in the first urban college. Six and a half hours of classroom observations were completed in six different classes where there were concentrations of Black male students. For each of these classes there were between four to seven Black males. It is not possible to be specific in stating the amount of time for social observations or informal classroom observations, as these often occurred in spontaneous and unplanned fashion. In the same way that the interview data was analysed through a process of inductive reasoning, the same process was applied to the observations of participants, and field notes and research journal entries were read and re-read to identify common themes and patterns. These themes were then initially mapped onto the seven existing themes identified through focus group and interview work. At this point it was then possible to identify new emergent themes not already accommodated.

To enhance the data collected through focus groups, individual interviews and observations four of the research participants, who had collectively studied at the college for 12 years, were given cameras and asked to photograph images that they believed represented life in a FE college. The photographs provided a further medium for students to express themselves and to offer their understanding of the key features of FE. No specific instructions were given to these four participants, other than they should photograph the images they found most significant. All of the students who participated in this part of the research were

studying on a different programme and although would have recognised each other by appearance, could not be described as a friendship group. A total of 79 separate images were produced, and each student had a separate debriefing meeting to discuss the images they had produced.

A similar process of inductive reasoning was applied to the photo-records which were scrutinised for recurring images. This again, produced common themes and patterns which were cross-checked with the research participants in a debriefing interview, where the participants gave further supporting information on the images they had selected. Although as stated earlier the students who participated in collecting photo-records were not part of the same friendship group, there was a surprisingly high level of consistency in the images they had each selected, and a new key theme of the paramount importance of friendship groups and the social function of college including the opportunity to meet female students, which was not readily apparent through the other data collection techniques emerged.

The photographs also reinforced and supported themes which had previously been surfaced through other data collection processes and students took images to represent:

- their satisfaction with their programme of study;
- the approachable nature of their tutors;
- the friendly and welcoming atmosphere of the college;
- the affinity that the research participants felt towards the college.

In total then, including data collected on achievement, I had nine separate themes relating to the participants' experiences of FE. In the next section I will describe how I integrated all the data collected, to produce a composite picture of how the research participants perceived and experienced life in FE.

5.6.3 Integration of Collected Data

In this research I used five principal data collection techniques: focus groups, individual interviews, participant photo-records, and observations supplemented with some numerical achievement data. Each of these 'blocks' of data was analysed and processed in order to derive meaning from them. Although the five techniques have been presented as separate entities, this is an artificial division, and each data block has served to deepen and develop

meaning of the whole experience. The different data collection techniques have therefore acted in a complementary fashion to help to build up a holistic picture of the participants' experience. The data collected through discussions and interviews produced the key themes of the participants' experience, and yet this approach was not adequate to give a wider account of this experience. The other research techniques, photo-records, observations and achievement data, added to this information and helped to build up a multilayered picture, providing new perspectives and ideas.

In the next chapter, I use these nine key themes to discuss the research participants' experience of FE. In reading these findings it is important to appreciate that each key theme is part of a whole and that no one theme exists in isolation from the other, and it is important that each theme should be viewed as an integral and interdependent part of the whole.

5.6.4 Selection of Data for Thesis

As 'authors (we) decide whose stories (and quotes) to display and whose to ignore' (Hertz, 1997, pxii). I have already described how, through a multi-stage, inductive, immersion process I was able to refine the research themes used in this inquiry. I applied the same process in selecting the illustrative examples used from participant dialogue, photographs and observations. The initial stage of this process was, once again, to assemble all the data as a whole, so that I had a clear overview of the circumstances that produced the data. Only once I had this understanding was I able to decide which would be the most representative examples to select, and which typified participant responses.

While it might be suggested that the selection of examples was open to researcher bias, I was careful to ensure I selected data which typified participants' responses, and this data was determined by the themes which emerged through the inquiry. I would strenuously resist any challenge of selecting data which conveniently matched pre-conceived notions, as I have faithfully adhered to appropriate ethical practice, and because my research was exploratory, phenomenological research, I did not embark on this process with a pre-determined hypothesis, which I wished to prove.

5.7 Rejecting Research Approaches

I have argued throughout this section, that this research has been a dynamic process which needed the capacity to capture the voices and experiences of the participants and had to be sufficiently flexible to respond to potential changes in direction. Some research approaches

although initially considered, were eventually rejected as they did not provide this level of responsiveness and flexibility, and therefore would not be suitable tools to collect the necessary data. The data collection process itself had to mirror the dynamic interactive nature of the research.

The methodological approaches of action research, documentary analysis and scientific research were all rejected, for different reasons, as they failed to fit the research objectives of this work. The interventionist approach of action research was unsuitable, as my inquiry was not seeking to 'improve and reform practice' (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2000, p226) in the immediate sense of action research. Rather, the purpose of my research was to develop understanding of an under-researched area, which may later help to inform suggestions of how education might be developed for this cohort of students. The contribution of this research was primarily the development of knowledge which could later feed into policy and practice.

Similarly although some documentary evidence was used in this research, my investigation was not solely suited to a documentary analysis approach. The reasons for this were, firstly insufficient documentary evidence existed regarding the experience of Black males in FE in the UK to make such an approach plausible, and secondly the intention of this research was to collect contemporary evidence on the lived experience of Black males. For this research, the 'here and now' (FE in the 2000s) was more important than the 'there and then'.

Finally scientific research was also rejected as unsuitable for this research. My inquiry was situated research and took place in a dynamic context. As such the tight controls associated with scientific experimentation and methods were not achievable, nor was it possible to replicate the experiences and test their validity, in a scientific way. As such the research area was wholly unsuited to a scientific, positivist method of investigation.

Correspondingly, certain research techniques and tools were also rejected as they were incompatible with the research aims. Static, solitary information collection techniques such as questionnaires were rejected, as these would provide little opportunity for the research participants to develop and explore their ideas relating to FE. Accordingly, the ethnographic methods and techniques described earlier were adopted in preference to other methods because ethnography provided the best opportunity to capture the spontaneity of voice and other lived experiences of the research participants.

5.8 Issues Presented by the Research Process

This research involved working with 29 Black males over a period of some 15 months from two different FE colleges. Yet I need to ask 'how representative are this group for the research topic?' In the end although a variety of different courses were accessed and students studying from entry level through to advanced level on full-time and part-time programmes study participated in the study, it was still a numerically small group who took part, and consequently could not fulfil:

> *the requirement of statistical sampling procedures, which are usually seen as fundamental to generalising from the data gathered in a study to some larger population.*

Schofield, 2007, p183

It would therefore be reckless to try and generalise out from the data collected and attempt to make claims for a broader population. However, although the data cannot claim to be representative of the whole population of Black males attending FE colleges, the quality of the data collected is of sufficient depth to 'produce a coherent and illuminating description' (ibid) of the participants' lives and to provide insights into the experiences of this group. Perhaps more suitably though, this study could be used and applied 'to understanding another similar situation' (ibid, p187) and so could have direct relevance to Black males studying in other FE colleges. Although in the final analysis, it will be for the reader to decide, based on 'similarities and differences' (ibid, p188), how relevant the findings of my research would be to their particular situation and how likely they believed my findings 'might occur in the other situation' (ibid).

The way in which the groups were selected for observation poses a further issue for consideration. Initially groups where there were concentrations of Black students were chosen, as this would speed the data collection process. My initial choice was made on a time basis and expediency decision, which did not consider the quality or nature of contributions the participants may have been able to make. In this way isolated and individual students were omitted from the study. It is not possible to say what these students, in their marginal and potentially uncomfortable position, may have said about their experience of FE. Further, the participants who took part in the research were mostly in the 16-20 age bracket. Although this appears to be representative of the population of Black

males in FE in general, and in the two research colleges in particular, I was unable to work with many older Black learners, and so have been unable to present information from their perspective. In hindsight it may have been beneficial to meet with a more diverse group of learners and to find ways of broadening the research group.

Another concern which required consideration was the research sample of students from the second college were initially informed of the research study was provided by the vice principal of this college. Although she did not hand pick the students who participated, her involvement in itself is problematic. As a powerful authority figure within the college, it is possible that some students may have chosen not to take part in the study, simply because it was a request made by the vice-principal and consistent with a 'cool pose' agenda may have decided they did not wish to appear to be pro-authority (see section *5.3.1 Ethical Issues*). Equally, those students who did choose to participate may have felt under pressure to perform in a certain way, fearful that if they did not, information would be passed back to the vice-principal which could have been personally difficult for them.

Further issues were produced by the choice of methods selected for the research, particularly in regard to issues associated with immersion, and specifically how could I, as a quasi-outsider, truly hope to immerse myself in the daily experiences of the research group being separated by age, gender and institutional position?   In essence the most this study can claim is, I was able to observe and witness as much as the participants were willing and happy to reveal to me. However, in acknowledging this position, there is no suggestion that the research participants were intentionally manipulative or secretive in their behaviours.

Other considerations which required attention were the potential compromises both for the research participants as students of the college in relation to disclosures they may have chosen to make, and for myself as a staff member in managing information shared during the research process. To offer some protection against this it was necessary to build in boundaries and checks as a means of preventing compromising situations and the potential charge of making unrealistic promises, especially regarding confidentiality. Although these difficulties were apparent from the very beginning of the research, after careful consideration it was viewed that using ethnographic methods and techniques still provided considerable benefits, not least in that it appeared to be the most suitable mechanism for giving voice to a marginalised group, who commonly operated on the fringes of education (see also section *5.3.1. Ethical Issues*, for a fuller discussion of issues, boundaries and safeguards).

Another issue I faced was in selecting student quotes to include in the research report. This was an important decision, as at this point, it would have been possible to manipulate the data and only include the information that supported the points I wished to make, and therefore betray both ethical research practices and, more importantly, the research participants themselves. To a degree the research data itself provided some safeguards against this practice, for by allowing the research data to 'speak to me' and tell the 'research story', the final typologies used were not solely my creation.   Indeed, the table of themes included in section *5.6.1* of this chapter, shows that over half of the research themes used in the final report were created by the research participants themselves. The high degree of agreement across the research participants relating to each of the key research themes (which in some cases was so strong that different participants who did not know each other, studying at different colleges, used almost identical words when discussing issues), also helped this process, and to a degree I found myself, not selecting quotes to *exemplify* a theme, but using quotes which *typified* the general agreement across the participant cohort.

A further concern which needed to be taken into account was in working with the participants' words, I had to interpret their words in order to reveal deeper meaning. While on one level this was not problematic, as the students words could be accepted as a literal representation of the truth as they perceived it, I need to acknowledge that the information I was working with only represented the information which the participants were willing to declare. As such, although this might be 'the whole truth', to use a familiar idiom it could equally be like 'the tip of an iceberg'. To try and mitigate against this difficulty and to determine whether I had gained a full and complete understanding of the participants views, I invited all the participants back to a validation meeting to determine if I had accurately represented their views. In this meeting the participants were able once again to reiterate key points and ideas, and it was these key ideas I used as a guide when selecting quotes to include in the research report. For these reasons, it is my assertion that the research findings discussed in the next chapter are both representative and an authentic record of the participants' views.

5.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explained the methodological perspectives which underpin this research. I have related the research question to the wider methodological positions and have stated how and why this research fits into these paradigms. I have indicated why

phenomenological inquiry and ethnographic methods were best suited to the research question, and I have shown how the methodology, methods and techniques were underpinned by an ethical approach. I have described in detail the separate research techniques used to investigate the research question, and have indicated how these particular techniques helped to produce a richly textured, multilayered picture of life in FE for the research participants. Although the methodology, methods and techniques I used were, I believe, the most relevant and appropriate for this research, they also produced a number of concerns. I do not claim to have satisfactorily resolved all these concerns, yet I do state my awareness of these difficulties has ensured that the research process maintained integrity which was both respectful of and respectful towards the research participants.

I have chosen to position this chapter at this point so that the reader can link the research approaches I selected directly to my research findings. To present this information after the findings chapter I believe would be problematic, as it would have created an artificial separation between the research process and the outcomes of research and would not have acknowledged the sequence of my actions as a researcher. The findings of my research are presented in full in the next chapter, *Research Findings from the Two FE Colleges*.

CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE TWO FE COLLEGES

I will use this chapter to present my research findings and my analysis of these findings using the data collected from the research participants attending the two participating FE colleges. The findings and my analysis are a synthesis of the data produced through focus groups, individual interviews, observations, photo-records together with some numerical achievement data. Full details on how this data was collected in presented in the previous Chapter 5, *Research Methodology*. My findings are based on data produced by the 29 students who participated in the study. The principal data was generated through focus group work and individual interviews, with further supporting information provided from observations of the research participants in social and academic settings, and from photo-records compiled by four of the research participants. Interpretations of the data were checked with the research participants through a validation process (see section *5.3.1 Ethical Issues* in preceding chapter).

The findings in this chapter are presented in the same order as *Table 5: Research Themes,* provided in the previous chapter. I decided to provide all the research findings in a single chapter, because of the interdependency of the research findings, which have natural linkages between each of the given categories. Although it would have been possible to split the findings into smaller, separate chapters, this would have produced artificial divisions between the key themes, which in themselves are artificial and constructed. By keeping all the findings together and cross-referencing to other categories, I have at least minimised this separation and facilitated readers making connections between the key themes. While not repeating information already covered in Chapter 4, *Literature Review,* all findings have been related back to the canon of existing literature, so that the connections between my research and the present body of knowledge are apparent.

Some numerical data relating to the academic success rates of the research participants within the first urban college has been included to help describe the academic positioning of the participant cohort within the overall achievement levels for this college. In addition to this data, I discuss trends in academic achievement for Black students over a three year period attending the first urban college. All data has been combined to produce a holistic picture of the participants' experience of life in FE colleges and their feelings towards the sector. The

accuracy of my interpretations was tested via a participant validation meeting (for further information see section *5.3.1 Ethical Issues*).

Data Organisation

The variety of data collection techniques used produced a wealth of information. In presenting this information, I have chosen to use the seven themes produced from the outcomes of the focus groups and individual interviews, together with the two additional themes produced by photo-records and achievement data, as my principal organising framework. These themes are identified in *Table 5: Research Themes* in the previous chapter, and are: The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges; The College Curriculum; Support Mechanisms Available to Participants; Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges; Personal Issues regarding Motivation; The Difference Between FE and School; and Racism in Schools, FE and Wider Society. The process by which I arrived at these themes is discussed in detail in sections *5.5.6, Using Numerical Data; 5.6.1, Data Generated Through Focus Groups and Individual Interviews* and *5.6.2 Data Generated Through Observations and Photo-Records*. Although one data collection technique may have principally produced the theme under discussion, where relevant I have integrated further data produced by the other research techniques into these headings.

6.1. The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges

My first category, institutional culture, is in itself, a problematic area. Describing the culture of an institution is a hard task, for it embraces the ethos and atmosphere of an institution, its mores and accepted norms. Institutional culture is created by externally imposed and internally created policies, by those who implement the policies and by those who live and experience these policies and practices. Yet, institutional culture is more than this - it is the unspoken, unwritten code which pervades all aspects of the institution and is not formulated solely by the written regulations or rules. It is that aspect of an institution, which is felt and understood to varying degrees by its members, yet is not always articulated and is only in part promoted by the policies and formal procedures of that institution. It is the organic production of human interpretation and enactment, and creates the lived reality of attending that institution. However, the individuals who attend an institution are as much creators of an institution's culture as they are recipients of it, and the continuance of the culture is ensured and 'transmitted through (their) interactive human community' (Thornton, 2006, online) and

it is those same individuals who 'will come to inhabit various cultures and subcultures within established systems of collective meaning' (ibid).

For the purposes of this research institutional culture will mean the collectively understood 'code' by which the institution operates, and the behaviour and practices which members of that institution are expected to adhere to. In everyday language, and for this research, institutional culture will mean the 'feel of the place' and 'the way people do business' in that place, for it is principally these two features, which impart a unique character or ethos to an institution.

As the all enveloping mantle of an establishment, institutional culture is an area which all members of an organisation can comment on authoritatively, for they will all understand what it *feels* like to them to attend and be part of that institution, and, whether or not they believe they are accepted as a rightful member of that community. It would be naive and inaccurate to suggest that there could be a single homogenous institutional culture within any organisation, or there was a simple and 'easy definition of "institutional culture" ' (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, online), and within any institution a variety of differing subcultures could reasonably be expected to exist. The issue here for students is that, within the range of existing institutional subcultures, as members of a college community they are entitled to be included within a centralised student culture that respects and acknowledges individuals and accords them both value and worth. In this regard the culture of an institution is a critical factor in determining whether or not a student remains at a college, and even before they arrive, will inform the student's decision on whether or not they wish to apply for a place to attend a particular college.

Determining the nature and culture of colleges is further complicated by:
- the lack of an agreed unequivocal definition of the primary purpose of colleges;
- the ongoing need for colleges to be responsive to the needs and demands of community, 'industry and commerce' (Hall, 1994, p10);
- and a historical lack of central planning which has not 'been directed by Government' (ibid, p18) but has been delegated to individual colleges.

Indeed Hall went onto claim that colleges were so complex that they could not be 'easily classified' (ibid, p42) and were in reality 'a rich tapestry woven and modified over the years to meet the changing needs of industry, commerce, the public sector and students' (ibid).

Against this complex and complicated background Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) have attempted to describe cultures within education. They have suggested that education institutions can be divided into two basic forms of culture: those characterised by individuality where staff members close themselves off from colleagues and slavishly adhere to dogma and those characterised by collaboration where staff share, question and challenge. They further suggest that those institutions which are collaborative will foster an atmosphere of continual improvement and promote the success of their students, while those institutions which are individualised can, at best, only hope to survive and their students can only hope to attain the minimum. Jarvis proposes an alternative construction of culture within colleges, which is philosophically underpinned by a:

> *concern about the development of learners as persons. This is a humanistic,*
> *progressive perspective and one that is prevalent in adult education.*
> 1995, p208

Fullan, Hargreaves and Jarvis' views are significant when considering the pervading culture of an institution, for depending on which model a college subscribes to, the level at which students can ultimately hope to achieve will be influenced.

Although in common with all educational establishments, from nursery schools to universities, FE colleges have written rules that college members are obliged to follow, in this research many of the students commented on the lack of formal and perceived 'petty' rules that they had experienced in compulsory secondary schooling. To the participant cohort it often appeared that these school rules were enforced for the sake of dogma rather than valid educational reasons. By contrast, FE colleges appeared to have an overt absence of formal rules. And indeed, the culture appeared to mirror the collaborative approach identified by Fullan and Hargreaves, and the progressive humanity described by Jarvis. This led students to comment that:

JLF: Rules. I suppose the rules are cool, 'cause like the rules here are basically just like standard life rules. I don't feel like I'm restricted.

L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 50-51

Some students even after studying at the college for some considerable time (all students who participated in the study had attended their chosen college for a minimum of six months, and some had attended for up to four years) professed little or no knowledge of the college rules. This was even after they would have received a college induction and further follow-up tutorial sessions where the rules would have been restated and clarified, so that the research participants made statements such as:

ZJ: Rules? That's the best thing. You can't exactly go on about the rules can you?

CC: Yeah true.

LM: I don't even know the rules.

L1 Sports NVQ Focus Group lines 93-96

CB: The rules?

JG: What are the rules?

Int: Well you've both been to school and you know the rules there. Does this place have lots of rules or what?

JG: No it's a bit laid-back innit? Not that bad really.

L2 Business Focus Group lines 294-298

These comments do not indicate that FE colleges lack rules, as management and governance guidelines, would oblige all FE colleges to have extensive policies and procedures; rather they demonstrate that the way in which these policies are applied is with the minimum force required and the dogma that students perceived had existed at secondary school was apparently absent. There thus existed a prevailing perception that colleges ostensibly lacked readily visible and obvious rules or hierarchies, which were supported and reinforced by the imposition of structures and precepts. Such a 'casual' approach to the enforcement of discipline and systems could be criticised, as students may find themselves inadvertently breaking rules that they did not know existed. However, from the response of the research participants it was apparent that this more relaxed, adult approach suited the needs of these young and developing adults far better, and they appreciated dispensing with the need to

conform for conformity's sake. This was succinctly summarised by one participant who stated that:

> *MW: A school leaver would fit into college a lot more, 'cause they'll understand*
> *more. It's not like they're being held down and pressured.*
> MW lines 54-55

The perception that school was a pressured and controlling environment was a commonly held belief among the research participants, who expressed a view that school was an experience they endured rather than one which they enjoyed and thrived in. Or, more extremely, for some of the participants 'schooling (was) constructed as a kind of warfare' (Fordham, 1996, p283) in which they were either embattled or under siege.

The perceived absence of excessive or unreasonable rules led students to comment that college lacked the strictness they had experienced while studying at school, and produced an entirely different institutional atmosphere. An atmosphere that relied more on individuals managing and taking control of their own behaviour rather than being instructed to carry out functions by staff. Some of the research participants appeared to suggest that school staff, in the process of fulfilling their controlling function, became transformed from tutors into oppressors or virtual gaolers. In this sense their schools became transformed into a 'prison' (Sewell, 1997, p42) from which they wanted to escape; a place where they were detained against their will; a place where co-operation was obtained through compulsion rather than choice, as exemplified by the comments below:

> *JG: School was more strict than this.*
> *CB: Most of the teachers never shout here.*
> *JG: Basically you can leave college when you want. It's definitely not strict. You can*
> *drop out and stuff. You couldn't do that at school could you?*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 33-36

> *KHa: The atmosphere. It's well cool.*
> L2 Art Focus Group line 645

However, despite the apparently 'laissez-faire' approach to rules and discipline, all students acknowledged the need for and existence of college rules, which on occasions would need to be enforced. However, the manner in which tutors enforced the rules, was perceived to be

very different to their school experience. College tutors were viewed as impartial arbitrators who avoided unnecessary interrogation and sought to collect both sides of a story before reaching any conclusions or imposing sanctions. This view is cogently expressed by the following comments:

> *LR: Listen to my side?*
> *LT: Most of the time.*
> *LB: Yeah. Just say me and you had an argument. They aint going to listen to me and not listen to you. They'd get both sides.*
> *NK: Of course.*
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 302-306

> *CS: We really don't get them people grilling you in college.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group line 122

This informal and relaxed approach was further reinforced by the manner in which staff allowed students to address them, and in turn, the way that staff chose to speak to students:

> *MW: That's what makes it better than school as well. You can talk to teachers without saying 'Sir', or having to talk to them like they're all high. 'Cause the teachers here are on the same level if you know what I mean.*
> MW lines 122-124

This is a significant point. Research shows that Black students in schools regularly reported being on the receiving end of unfair and unjust treatment, to the point where some students felt that 'teachers did not care about them' (Blair and Bourne, 1998, p85). To be given the permission to speak to your tutors on first name terms is a clear statement of a cultural shift between schools and colleges, a reinforcement of the humanistic approach described by Jarvis, and a message that college is about participation between equal partners, as opposed to a hierarchically structured environment where students are, as a matter of course, viewed as less significant and less important than staff members. I explore these feelings of being devalued later in this chapter, when I discuss the participants' perceptions of the two sectors, and the perceived differences between the two sectors in the section *6.6 The Differences between Colleges and Schools*.

It was not only the terms of address between staff and students that were different, but also the way in which staff worked with students during taught sessions. The common student perception was that most taught classes were characterised by their relaxed and friendly atmosphere, where staff and students could literally share 'a laugh and a joke' in a reciprocally respectful environment. The positive benefits of such an atmosphere are also noted by Kher, Molstad and Donahue who state that 'appropriate and timely humor in the college classroom can foster mutual openness and respect and contribute to overall teaching effectiveness' (1999, p400). In my research, the use of humour was openly endorsed, by several participants who made comments such as the ones contributed by MW and KB below:

> *MW: I'd say that I've had a laugh in lessons. I still do. I have a laugh with the teachers and what not.*
> MW lines 120-122

> *KB: You can have a joke in class, a joke or whatever, and in that way you're enjoying the work more. And you're more awake instead of just being dry and quiet and dull where you're falling asleep.*
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 559-561

The use of humour and the sharing of mutual jokes was thus seen as a significant factor contributing to the institutional culture of the college. The relaxed approach reinforced the more liberal working practices of colleges where having a laugh and a joke together were seen as acceptable in the working environment and not detrimental to progress or achievement. This is demonstrated by the following comment:

> *NR: You can have a laugh in that lesson.*
> *DC: It's exciting, funny. We liven it up.*
> L1 Sports NVQ Focus Group lines 187-188

Indeed Ofsted noted that staff/student conversation which was 'lightened by humour' (2002, p10) was one of the features of a successful learning climate, and Woods further observed that laughter could be used productively to 'forge better relationships and to create an atmosphere judged to be conducive to the achievement of the aims of the school' (1976,

p178). Kher, Molstad and Donahue believe that humour is even more important than this, describing it as 'a catalyst for classroom "magic"', (1999, p401) which enhances teaching and promotes learning. Korobkin goes even further and states that humour used productively can 'cultivate freer interaction, idea generation and group cohesiveness, while reducing anxiety, conformity and dogmatism' (1988, p155). However, the Black students who participated in my research, appeared to have no access to this sort of laughter or positive use of humour while at school, and if laughter occurred at all it was 'a reaction against authority and routine' (ibid).   Moreover, when students experienced teachers having a joke at school it was more often perceived as aggressive and disrespectful towards them and their culture, or as one student explained in other research:

> *Keith: Those so-called jokes, were no joke, you were being cheeky. I went home and told my mum and she said that if you say it again she would come and sort you out. As for that girl, if it was my father, he wouldn't just take you to the CRE, he would also give you a good thump. My father says that a teacher should set a good example for the children by respecting each one, whether black or white.*
> Eggleston, Dunn, Anjali and Wright, 1986, p131

Significantly, Keith's comments also appear to reveal an undercurrent of racist humour, which has been used in such a hostile fashion that intervention by the Commission for Racial Equality was considered appropriate. Here again, Kher, Molstad and Donahue state that 'in appropriate use of humour creates a hostile learning environment that quickly stifles communication' and that 'racial slurs and put-downs of a target group must be avoided' (1999, p402). This point is also emphasised by Korobkin who confirms that 'ethnic, racial, religious and other forms of such humour must be carefully scrutinised before they are used in an educational context' (1988, p156).

The collective impact of the perceived lack of dogma and imposed hierarchies, together with the presence of an informal atmosphere, supported by the use of humour, produced a relaxed, safe and easy atmosphere among this student cohort, leading them to observe that, in contrast to their generally negative school experience, colleges were places where :

> *JS: There's always stuff poppin'.*
> L2 Business Focus Group line 45

Within a contemporary context, where Black males are regularly portrayed as 'the young male who raps or plays the dozens[4]' (Majors and Billson, 1992, p100) or who adopts 'a ritualised form of masculinity'(ibid, p4), a positive youth culture which opposes such aggressive presentations and actively seeks 'poppin' events contradicts current popular imagery which 'pander to existing racial stereotypes' (Maylor, Ross, Rollock and Williams, 2006, p64) and portray Black males as 'gangsters (and) drug smugglers' (ibid). This position was re-enforced by students who commented on the safety of the college environment and the apparent lack of hostility and aggression. This led one student to comment that:

> LB: I've never come to college and felt unsafe or that there's someone out to get me, or no-one's going to talk to me, or teachers stressing my case.
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 457-458

The overall friendliness of the college was so significant that students were happy to make the statement that they thought college was like a home to them. So much so, that for some Black males, the need to take part in a 'relentless performance for the mainstream audience' (ibid) was temporarily suspended, and the young males could, as observed at the end of Chapter 4, 'just be themselves'. This again, is in stark contrast to my earlier description of schools where I suggested that schools were more like centres of detention rather than offering the comforts of home. This is articulated in the following excerpts:

> LB: To me, the college is like a home. It's like a second home to me. So I recommend my course and college to a lot of people.
> LB lines 130-131

> JC: People aren't here to fight. The atmosphere, you can just tell. People are just here to do whatever they're doing. Like make friends or whatever. Everyone's laid back man.
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 214-216

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[4] 'Play the dozens': a ritualised form of verbally insulting another person

JW: College is like a home. College is like a second home to me, or I should say first home 'cause I spend more time in college than what I do at home. It's like a home really.
JW lines 81-83

Although the stated government agenda for FE colleges is 'improving employability and supplying economically valuable skills' (Foster, 2005, p5) to learners through the provision of relevant courses, college was viewed by students as serving a wider function of being a place where new friendships could be forged and existing friendships could be maintained, so that:

EF: Even if you didn't know them out before college, at least you've made friends.
L3 Focus Group lines 42-43

College was, therefore, not just a place of learning, but was also a social zone, which assisted learners in making new friends and staying in contact with their previous associates.

However, of all the factors which produced the institutional culture, it was the feature of adult treatment that the students responded to most positively and appeared to value most highly. The reason students placed such a high premium on this feature is not entirely clear, but may be because it sharply contrasted with their school experiences and signified a complete change in organisational culture. The following comments help to illustrate this position:

KB: You're treated differently from schools. More like adults.
KHa: Yeah, you get a bit more respect. That's it really.
Int: Is that a good thing, getting a bit more respect?
KB: When you're in school, like basically, you just get treated like kids. College is different.
L2 Art Focus Group lines 60-64

LB: All the teachers here are safe.
LT: Yeah.
Int: Why? What's the difference?

LB: They treat you more mature. They treat you like adults. That's what I think
anyway.
Int: Did they treat you like adults at school?
LB: No. I don't think so.
L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 75-81

EF: Yeah, I do feel respected.   I don't get treated like a child. I get treated on the
same level as teachers, and I value certain teachers as friends as well.
L3 Focus Group lines 216-217

It is an interesting point of consideration that the very feature that students valued most highly (that of being treated like an adult) which is a consequence of FE colleges being a place where older learners are eligible to attend to study, simultaneously caused concern to some of this same population, as they had to adjust to a different and 'more "mature" atmosphere in contrast to the rules and styles encountered in some schools' (FEU, 1987, p7). This ambivalence is helpfully summarised in the following comment:

CC: There's more older people in class. So you'll get people who are like 19, 20 in
your class, you get socialised with adults. At school it's more like your own age.
Int: So is it a bad thing having older people in the class?
CC: It's not a bad thing, but you feel more comfortable around your own age.
L1 Sports NVQ Focus Group 637-641

Data collected through classroom observations helped to contextualise and substantiate much of the information students identified in the focus group sessions, where they felt that they were treated with fairness and respect. Following a classroom observation I have noted in my field notes that:

To my perception the tutor had adopted a very even handed approach. It was true
that some of the Black males were shouting across the group and were not working,
but so too were other students. There was no sense of the tutor focussing on the Black
students or singling them out.
Field Notes, 20 March 2006

The important issue here is that students were not unnecessarily 'picked on', nor did their being Black seem to increase their visibility with regards to unfavourable tutor attention. This data supports the findings of the focus group and one-to-one interviews, and provides further confirmatory evidence of the positive way in which college tutors chose to work with Black students.

In another observation of a different tutor I have noted that:

> *Issues of 'control by force' were not apparent and it appeared to be control through co-operation and respect*
> Field Notes 3 March 2006

This pattern of classroom control through negotiation and respect was a common theme identified in the focus groups and individual interviews by the research participants who felt that the manner in which they were treated significantly differed from school and so provides helpful triangulation of the data. When it was necessary to take action to refocus a group or an individual, tutors usually achieved this by moving over to the individual(s) and taking time to work separately with the student(s) on the area of concern. The pattern of shouting at classes to gain attention and control was not observed nor was the practice of making an example of students in front of the entire class. These observations are entirely consistent with the student reflections noted in the focus groups.

Across the series of formal and informal classroom observations completed in the first urban college a set of common themes emerged. These were:

1. There were no visible formal structures – registers were not called out, there was no need to line up outside the class and there was no requirement to call the tutor Miss, Mr or Sir.
2. Students were routinely allowed to sit where they chose unless there was a specific learning need to formulate groups in another way. No seating plans or other instruments of social manipulation were apparent in any lessons.
3. Students were allowed to have cold drinks in the lessons.
4. Tutors were tolerant of calling out in class and did not insist students raised their hands.

5. There was a flexible approach to time keeping and if students were less than 10 minutes late for a session no sanctions were applied.

6. Tutors were calm and measured in their approach to students.

In themselves, none of these measures may seem significant. However, the combined effect of all these measures helped to produce a different institutional atmosphere which students talked of so positively. The collective message appeared to be 'this is FE, things are different here and students are expected to accommodate this'. The style of the institutions changed from control by coercion to control by consent. This was *the* difference that, for students, made FE a new educational experience and presented them with an alternative way to learn.

I have used this section to show that the students involved in this research were able to identify many positive aspects associated with the institutional culture of colleges and that students were generally responsive to and enjoyed this new experience. In particular it is apparent that students appreciated the lack of formality, readily visible rules and rigid hierarchal structures. For the students involved in this research this produced a relaxed and informal atmosphere. At the same time, however, there were some feelings of unease expressed in relation to having older learners in the same class whose presence generated a different 'feel' to the learning environment. What is not clear from this research is whether these feelings were solely associated with the presence of all older learners, certain types of older learners, or if they were the feelings of dislocation that could reasonably be expected by any student moving from a familiar environment to a new environment. Equally I cannot confirm from this research if the responses of the participants were intrinsically linked to the participants being Black, being young, a combination of those features or some other reason which was not obviously apparent. There is thus a lack of clarity here, and it is not obvious if the different feel was created solely by the age difference between the research participants and older learners, which would raise generational issues and questions, or that this feeling was a result of a racialised perspective relating to the way the Black participants felt they should respond to *older, white* learners in the class. Further, it may even be that the research participants viewed such white participants not simply as older people, but as older authority figures, akin to teaching staff. Unfortunately, I was unable to explore the reasons for this feeling within this particular piece of research. However, in spite of these uncertainties, I can state that the Black males who took part in my research, were unanimous in their assertion that the atmosphere and culture of FE colleges was not only different but it was *better* than

the one they had experienced in schools, and they were clear that they much preferred the ethos of FE.

6.2 The College Curriculum

Whereas schools have a statutory National Curriculum 'there is no single curriculum specification for further education' (Cantor, Roberts and Pratley, 1995, p48), and 'the wide – ranging needs of students, employers and other users and the diversity of the sector's response to them makes it difficult to talk of a single further education curriculum' (Frankel and Reeves, 1996, p11). Indeed, Frankel and Reeves go even further and describe the FE curriculum, somewhat critically, as the 'untidy residue of the curricula of other institutions' (ibid) – a curriculum that is not readily or easily classified. To accommodate this broad spectrum, and for the purposes of this research I have defined the curriculum as the taught subjects leading to qualifications which are either internally or externally assessed. I have adopted this definition because it is these qualifications that allow students to progress to the next stage in their academic career or into the world of work.

Historically it has been previously suggested by other researchers (Coard, 1971; Bagley and Coard, 1975) that a curriculum which does not recognise diverse cultures and promotes a Eurocentric view of the world has been one of the principal factors in depressing the achievement of Black students in that it prevents students from developing 'knowledge about their cultural heritage' (Bagley and Coard, 1975, p322). This view is echoed by Hall (2005) and again by Cassidy (2005) who both suggest that the taught curriculum is one of the causative factors in low achievement and that schools and colleges need to re-examine what they teach to young people.

Consequently multicultural and/or anti-racist perspectives have been explored by both schools and colleges in an attempt to address this difficulty and raise achievement levels of Black students. The taught curriculum within the FE sector is essentially identical to that within the statutory sector and students study the same syllabi and sit the same assessments. This curriculum, must therefore, be the same curriculum criticised by Bagley, Coard, Hall and Cassidy which denies students an opportunity to develop an understanding of their cultural heritage and depresses their achievement. The only area where it can be argued that there could be a substantial difference in the curricula offered by secondary schools and FE is that colleges, in consultation with the exam boards, are permitted to produce some college

generated units of work. Although, as these units are produced under strict guidance of the awarding bodies, little opportunity for creative assessment is actually afforded. However, a more significant difference between schools and colleges is the opportunity students have to choose and select the subjects they study. The impact of this is that from the inception of their course students' initial motivation levels are often much greater. Consequently these students generally approached their studies in a far more positive fashion and commented in the following way:

> *Int: How do you find the curriculum here at college?*
> *JW: It's not perfect. No it's perfect but it's not 100% spot on. With college you more or less get your choice of what you want to learn because you look through the manual, and you read about your course. When I read about this first diploma course I seen everything that it involved so I picked it. That's just the same with everybody.*
> JW lines 181-186

This is in opposition to the limited curriculum choice, produced by the requirements of the national curriculum (QCA, 2007) that most schools offer. Indeed, even in years 10 and 11 when students are permitted to make some choices about their future studies, this is limited with all students still being obliged to follow a compulsory core of mathematics, English and science, and in a small number of cases students are informed by their schools which options they must select, so limiting choice even further. Further, schools under pressure to achieve well in national league tables are sometimes believed to direct students to take certain subjects. Colleges, while needing to report on the achievement of their students do not have their data reported in the same manner, so removing a pressure to direct students to programmes of study in the same way. Students viewed colleges as having a greater range and a more appealing choice of opportunities. This positive attitude spilled over into other curriculum areas, so that even the less favoured subjects (which at the time of completing the research many colleges insist students study as a means of maximising college funding) became valued and students stated that:

> *JG: Even if it's boring it's still meaningful.*
> L2 Business Focus Group line 270

Additionally students appreciated the efforts made by staff to heighten the relevance of their subjects by making links to the vocational areas they were studying;

> LB: But it's not boring because they involve it. It's like I'm doing sports BTEC, and all the maths and English all involve something to do with sports. Like in English if I'm doing any writing up it will be a session plan. It's all to do with what we're doing in college- all the numeracy and communications and stuff. I think it's good because it involves what we're doing.
>
> LB lines 245-249

The initial opportunity to exercise choice and shape their own programme had the further added benefit that students were willing to grapple with some of the more challenging areas of the curriculum, which were now viewed as areas for development rather than an unwelcome and unwarranted academic imposition, leading CS to comment:

> CS: You're like engaged with the topic. Even though some of it's hard to get your head round, it's quite interesting.
>
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 337-338

Although there was a general agreement among the research participants that the college curriculum was more relevant and interesting than the school curriculum, the research participants also believed there was still room for improvement, as there were some echoes of the school curriculum being replicated in the college experience. This was particularly true of the college requirement that students continue to study literacy and numeracy. Some of this dissatisfaction linked directly to the students not achieving qualifications while at school and being obliged to repeat work or courses. As the students had some familiarity with the subjects this, for them, created repetition and boredom and they felt:.

> LM: It seems we're covering the same stuff from school, but in more detail
>
> L1 Sports NVQ Focus Group line 172

> KB: The thing is we've been learning the same thing like years. It's just too long.
>
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 198-199

This boredom was not only created by repeating work from school, but for some students was compounded because although on a personal basis they were able to connect with and trusted the college staff, some of the tutors lacked the appropriate communication skills to convey information in an engaging manner so that:

> *JC: Sometimes the way the teacher explains something. Like in Mick's lesson. It's just boring innit?*
> *SN: Basically, right, there could be better ways to put certain points across that are being taught that would make it more exciting. Something that we can relate to.*
> *JC: But he will relate it to something he knows about, and that's it.*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 54-59

This quotation not only emphasises a lack of communication skills as a perceived problem, but also indicates an inability to select appropriate examples, which would be relevant to this younger client group. Even though this student had assessed this particular tutor as 'boring', a further challenging conundrum was displayed as he then went onto say:

> *JC: Yeah, he is a good teacher. I'm not going to fault him, 'cause I did get a merit – thanks Mick. Yeah I got a merit, but I didn't understand what I was talking about.*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 69-71

This final comment appears to indicate that despite being a poor verbal communicator the tutor had successfully established a productive student rapport, which the student valued. The challenge of enabling the student to fully understand the work and opening up the curriculum in a meaningful fashion, remained for this tutor. What is not clear, however, is if this was a general communication problem of this tutor and if all learners had a similar experience, or if it was a specific communication problem related to the ethnicities of the tutor and the student. It is also possible that consistent with a 'cool pose' presentation, this student did not want to appear to be a high achiever in front of his peer group.

A specific and repeated criticism of the college curriculum was the length of sessions, and many students indicated that the standard two-hour session, common in many colleges, was excessive. Many students recognised that they could not stay engaged or focussed for this length of time:

JW: The day just drags.

TB: You get two 2-hour lessons.

JW: And the day just drags forever, forever.

L2 Sports Focus Group lines 57-59

CB: It's only boring when they're like two hours long.

L2 Business Focus Group line 26

While research on engagement and concentration is unable to offer a standard definition on adult concentration span, popular agreement is 'adults find it quite difficult to concentrate with unbroken attention for much more than about 20 minutes, for younger learners the concentration span is much less' (Teachernet, online). Furthermore 'there is clear evidence that learners concentrate and learn more from short, focussed activities' (ibid). Consequently it is not surprising that many students reported that they found the two hour long sessions both irksome and tiresome.

The specific issue of sessions being too long was managed by one tutor in the following way. Her focus was on the achievement of tasks she had set, and as long as the students completed the work they had been given she did not appear overly concerned if students engaged in other activities such as calling out in class. Again, I have noted in my field journal that the tutor stated:

> *It was unreasonable for a level 1 group to concentrate for the full session and if they could stay productively focussed for 20 minutes that was adequate, as long as the work was done.*
>
> Field Notes 20 March 2006

This comment may raise some issues in terms of expected work levels required, but the material issue here, is this approach is being applied to all students, and that there was no sense of one set of standards being applied to white students and another set of standards for the Black students. In addition to this, there was no requirement that students adopt behaviours that give the appearance of being productively engaged in work, and the tutor's focus was on the outcome of the session. To this end, she also recognised that students may struggle to stay engaged for a sixty minute session and this was, for her, an unrealistic

expectation of this level of students. This approach was more consistent with student concentration spans, and there was an open recognition that twenty minutes focussed work was a realistic expectation of a session.

The level of student dissatisfaction increased when the long sessions involved writing and many of the research participants also expressed concern regarding the need to complete written work. The negative attitude of the male research participants to writing is consistent with the gender differences 'between boys and girls in language and literacy skills' (DfES, 2007, p5) where girls consistently outperform their male counterparts. This is not a recent or new phenomenon, and this difference has been evidenced 'from historical data from English exam records going back 60 years' (ibid). Consequently, I was not surprised when some students openly stated how they had struggled with writing and found it dull and stated that:

> *LB: 'Cause writing can get boring. The work itself is good.*
> *LT: It's the fact of doing the writing. That's boring innit.*
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 498-499

> *Int: Anything in particular that's boring?*
> *LR: The writing.*
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 26-27

If colleges have a goal of enhancing curriculum relevance and increasing the engagement levels of students, this is a serious challenge to the status quo of delivery methods in colleges. To increase engagement it would be necessary for colleges and awarding bodies to begin a process of actively considering alternative methods for students to record their work and for them to be assessed in, other than traditional written methods.

In a final challenge to the college curriculum some students believed colleges failed to deliver adequate stimulation and change, both in terms of the curriculum content and in terms of the limited number of staff that students had the opportunity to work with, leading students to comment in the following way:

> *TB: Like at the beginning of college I reckon it was good because you're getting to know new people, but now it's coming to the middle, it's like the same thing.*
> *JW: It's like the same old on a different day.*
> L2 Sports Focus Group lines 198-201

While the participants were clear that they experienced decreasing levels of stimulation as the programme progressed, this could also be indicative of unrealistic expectations on the part of the students. Although the taught curriculum was discussed in the focus groups, and received a mixed assessment with further areas for improvement identified, the photo-records produced by some of the research participants provided evidence for the way in which the curriculum was delivered. In contrast to the organisation of some schools the photographs showed informal classrooms where the tutors were not immediately distinguishable from the student population and were usually integrated within the student population. There appeared to be a conscious decision on the part of the tutors to remove barriers that could exist between tutor and student. This was also commented on in the focus groups where students had noted that despite the difference in age between the students and the tutors, college tutors were 'on a level' and 'like them'. This point is developed further in section *6.4 Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges*.

In conclusion, the initial positive statement of one student that the curriculum was 'perfect, but not 100% spot on' was not consistently borne out by the views of other students and could be seen to be an overly optimistic assessment of the college curriculum. Students were able to clearly identify a number of areas for improvement including the length of sessions and the traditional method of recording work. However, the importance of this initial positive endorsement of the college curriculum remains, for it signifies a considerable difference in the students' perception of school and college curricula. This difference in perception does not appear to have been created as a result of the difference of the content or the mode of delivery, as these appear to be largely the same as school, but as discussed in the initial section of this chapter appear to be related to the atmosphere and ethos in which the curriculum is delivered. And, it is this difference which helped to make the curriculum more palatable for many of the research participants.

6.3 Support Mechanisms Available to Research Participants While at College

While studying at college students made use of a variety of different support mechanisms. These fell into three main categories: family support, staff support and peer support. I will use this section to describe each of these three different mechanisms and to discuss the appropriateness and the usefulness of each of these systems. Students also made reference to their own personal motivation and self-determination to succeed. Although, in some ways

similar, personal motivation and self-determination can be separated by the degree of 'moral outrage' associated with each. Self-determination can be described as a characteristic which enables individuals to continue and persist, even in difficult circumstances, as that person truly believes that (in spite of messages to the contrary) they can succeed. Indeed self-determination to succeed may be seen as a personal crusade to prove others wrong. In contrast although personal motivation is also a driving force to achieve, it is not characterised by the need to prove anything to anyone. Rather, it is a characteristic that drives individuals on to achieve because achievement in itself is sufficient reward. I will consider these issues later in section *6.5 'Personal Motivation to Succeed'*.

6.3.1 Staff Support

The support category students most often referred to was staff support. Although dedicated student support provision was available in both colleges, students made little reference to these, and when talking of staff support referred solely to the integrated class based support provided by the class tutors. This integrated student support provided by the regular class tutor appeared to be far more acceptable to the student population as it did not single them out as being different or having particular problems. The general support was low-key in nature and consequently students did not feel that they had to be sought out and offered additional separate assistance. This manner of working is significant, as this same student population has attracted much unwelcome negative staff attention in schools, and for number of Black students have become used to staff attention meaning they were 'in trouble' (see Wright, 1998; London Development Agency, 2004), or they may have been 'classified as mentally retarded or suffering from a learning disability' (Noguera, 2003, p432) and designated as needing remedial support. These are two very different reasons for students receiving a higher level of staff attention. However, both reasons are united as both are predicated on a deficit model which requires corrective intervention. Because of the negative associations of this kind of support some Black students could have, over time, become sceptical and suspicious of individualised or specialist staff attention, fearing it may signal punitive or detrimental action or signalling institutional surveillance. Within this research there is no direct evidence that the research participants held these fears or suspicions. However, it is significant that not a single participant identified the specific services of student support as useful or appropriate to their needs, nor did they make any reference to individualised staff support. This elective distancing of the participants from formal support systems could have been indicative of a feeling of unease regarding this type of support.

The factors identified by the research participants that made the support offered both acceptable and useful, was that students perceived staff in college as genuinely caring for their welfare. Believing that staff were concerned about student welfare meant that students felt the staff could be trusted, both in a professional capacity and as 'friends'. Although in one regard this level of closeness could be interpreted as a positive endorsement of the approachable nature of college staff, at the same time such a relationship may produce organisational difficulties if these same staff were required by the college to discipline those Black students who had come to view them as 'friends'. This situation is further complicated by the possibility that the Black students who may have invested significant emotional capital in the staff/student relationship, could then feel betrayed in some way, and may be even less willing to work with or trust staff in the future:

> *They treat you as friends. They can trust you, and we can trust them.*
> RC: line 150

> *If I needed help I wouldn't be struggling, I've got teachers who I like to think are friends who would help me.*
> EF lines163-164

However, one student (CS) recognised there may be issues of professional boundaries for staff and while recognising mutual respect existed, primarily viewed staff in the role of professional educator:

> *CS: You feel like they're here to teach you, you're here to learn. It's got that mutual respect.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group line 404-405

The assessment of teachers as friends was a crucial difference for this student population. They did not see their schoolteachers as friends and were deeply distrustful of them. There was a belief that student confidentiality would not be protected by school staff who were viewed as willing divulgers of student information:

RC: In school you couldn't trust them, 'cause if you told them something I know they would go and tell the headmaster or something. And they treated you as little kids as well. In college they treat you as adults.
RC: lines 151-153

Moreover, college staff were also seen as making a personal and emotional investment in the students. Indeed, in this research, some students felt the level of investment was so great, that it went beyond friendship to the point where staff were viewed more as concerned family members who had a genuine interest in student welfare, rather than college tutors, and students stated that:

NK: They've got this emotion for you. It's like Claudius, he treats you like a brother, like 'I want you to do well', and he's proper preaching to you like my Dad or something. They don't speak to you aggressively, like nastily.
LT: Its just getting a point across.
LB: I wouldn't say they speak to me aggressively. It's only like when they're trying to show me something.
L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 292-297

In this exchange the irritation that is sometimes evident in close family relationships is apparent. Claudius (a Black college tutor) is described as a 'brother' who 'preaches' like a 'dad'. Yet in his desire for students to do well Claudius is still *preaching* to the students. Significantly though, Claudius' behaviour was tolerated by the Black participants who appeared willing to suspend any resistance they may have had to authority, if that authority was displayed by tutors who the participants genuinely believed, cared about them. Such a perception further supports the earlier claim made by some students that to them, college was more like home, which had effectively become populated by surrogate family members. This closeness to the students was demonstrated both in the familiar way staff chose to communicate with students, and the way in which staff chose to dress and present themselves to students. In this way, while accepting the different roles of staff and students, students saw staff more as friends, as they were considered to be operating at the same level as the students themselves. This more casual and relaxed approach was in contrast to the hierarchies and formalities that were apparent in their schooling. The contribution of Black staff in teaching Black students is further explored in Chapter 8, *Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations.*

I think most students see college teachers more as a friend than a teacher. Because (our) teachers don't dress in a shirt and tie. My teacher dresses in tracksuit bottoms and trainers, and when I look at her I don't see her really as a teacher I see her more as a friend who's trying to help me get somewhere. I think if other students see a teacher the same way I do then it's a nice friendly environment. But if Julie was in a suit and tie and told me to call her 'Miss' I'd look at her and maybe think we're not going to get along. It's like I have to look up to you if I'm calling you Miss.
JW lines 154-261

LT: What teachers we got they're on a level aren't they? On our level anyway. We get along.
L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 249-250

Although college staff adopted an informal and relaxed approach in working with and supporting students, these same staff also seemed to be able to maintain an appropriate professional balance between demonstrating concern, but not overstepping personal boundaries by becoming too familiar or prying into individuals' private lives. Professionally for staff, the distinction between support and over-friendliness, or even the perception of being a surrogate family member, remained an occupational difficulty, as staff might still need to take action which could appear contrary to the act of a friend or concerned relative. Most of the research participants were positive about their relationships with tutors and commented that:

KB: I know that basically you can talk to anyone in college. We have one-to-one stuff and they ask 'How's college?' 'How's work?'
KHa: Mine talks about other stuff. Stuff outside. She opens a discussion about the weekend and stuff, anything in the news. Anything that's gone on really.
Int: Does that feel comfortable or does it feel she's too nosy?
KHa: It feels comfortable. It don't feel nosy 'cause she's getting it off the news. So it's good 'cause she knows what's happening around us. And she talks about our age group and our race, how it's vulnerable out on the streets and stuff. She just tells you to keep a cool head. She gives good advice.
L2 Art Focus Group lines 627-636

> *I've had a couple of problems at home and what not, and I can talk to the teachers*
> *here, and they can understand and advise me. They try and get me on the right path,*
> *speak to the right people I've got to speak to. It's a lot more helpful.*
> MW: lines 130-134

This last comment is particularly significant. Here was a teacher willing to acknowledge the difficulty of life 'out on the streets', issues of race and youth culture. This tutor showed an awareness 'of the complex identities of the boys, in a context where racism worked on a number of levels' (Sewell, 2004, p103) and demonstrated empathy with the problems that may be experienced in navigating 'the right path' expressed by MW. However, although staff were viewed as approachable and supportive, because most of the college staff were white, students still expressed a view that better support could be achieved if more Black staff were available, in an extension of the idea of 'fictive kinship'.

6.3.2 Peer Support

In the absence of appropriate cultural support from college staff, students formed their own informal Black student support groups, and they expressed a strong positive sense to be with and work with other Black students. This in itself appeared to be a supportive mechanism as it provided the students with a positive sense of self and gave them a sense of security, as a minority ethnic community within the college. This feeling was expressed in vivid terms by some students, who indicated that:

> *JW: The people we move with, care for each other. I care for my own, as simple as*
> *that.*
> *JS: Dog eat dog.*
> *JW: I care for you niggers.*
> L2 Sports Focus Group lines 313-317

Here JW fully endorses the notion of 'fictive kinship' seeing his Black identity as a paramount feature of his own identity, even though the same Black identity is 'stigmatised by the dominant society' (Fordham, 1996, p283) in which as JS states a 'dog eat dog' mentality persists. In the absence of other support systems to endorse the positive worth of being Black, this peer affirmation was viewed by the research participants as a vital tool in maintaining their cultural pride and integrity. Students also stated that they could more

effectively communicate with other students who had the same racial identity. Thus, even though the group were diverse and very different from each other they felt confident that their 'fictive kinship' would extend to each group member having experienced similar situations during their development. Further the group also believed this assumed commonality of experience would promote better communication between them. This is an interesting point – on one level the individual group members appeared keen to identify their own style and individualism, while on another level they appeared to support the notion of a collective identity. However, this same collectivism when expressed by those in authority (for example tutors), was not accepted and students resisted being subsumed into a homogenous 'African-Caribbean subculture' (Sewell, 1997, p44) where all students were seen as identical. All of these presentations existed simultaneously for these students, which highlights the complex issues of identity formation and presentation (see section *4.5 Black Students Presentation of Self in Secondary and Further Education Sectors*):

> *JW: Most of the time Black people get more at the same level, because you've got the same issues and things.*
> *Int: What issues?*
> *JW: Not issues, but the same things about you.*
> L2 Sports Focus Group lines 463-466

This comment by JW again illustrates the solidarity that existed within this group and presents a powerful alternative to the idea of role models and mentoring. For although appearing to acknowledge, like Sewell, that Black staff could have a useful role in supporting Black students as they navigate the education system, in the absence of such role models these students had, without direction, support or encouragement, produced their own support mechanisms. This idea is returned to in Chapter 8, *Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations*.

The students viewed it as important to have strong (both in the emotional sense and the physical sense), reliable friendship groups who could, if the need arose, offer support against any potential aggressors. It was not suggested that physical attacks were a regular or frequent occurrence, but the association with Black peers was seen as a kind of 'insurance policy' to protect against potential violence. In some ways group members operated a siege mentality and, as a matter of course, prepared for and expected the worse. Consequently in exchanges

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'involving conflict or competition' (Fordham, 1996, p72) 'fictive kinship' took on a heightened significance. This views is poignantly illustrated by the following dialogue:

> *JW: When I stop, think and look around me, that's when I realise the majority of people around me are Black. But, I don't have no objection in hanging round with white people, I just feel more secure with my own people than I would with white people. I don't know why. It's just something I do.*
>
> *Int: When you're talking about security, what is it that you think Black people would give you, that you're not sure white people would?*
>
> *JW: Defence.*
>
> *Int: Against what?*
>
> *JW: Anything really. No matter what, I think Black people as a team, we stick together more. If there's a group of Black friends, we will stick together more than a group of white friends.*
>
> JW lines 25-37

Although the group declared they were comfortable with their tutors and believed they enjoyed good support from them, when they needed emotional support they did not primarily see their tutors fulfilling this function, and it was their peers who offered emotional support in this instance. Again, it is interesting to reflect that the formal college student support mechanism was not deemed relevant here, but that friendship groups were as is shown by the comment below:

> *Int: So how do you get something wrong sorted out? Has anything gone wrong?*
>
> *JS: Something has gone wrong. I spoke to my mates and they just helped me through it. It's not like major things, it's like little things. Little things going down in college, they've helped me get through it.*
>
> *Int: Has that been enough, your mates?*
>
> *JS: Yeah, so far. I've never had to go to my tutor about anything yet.*
>
> JS lines 105-110

The high level of camaraderie and personal support extended to members of the group being prepared to take the blame for a peer's actions. The motivation for being willing to accept this blame was unclear, other than a further expression of friendship and support, and as an

affirmation of 'fictive kinship' where 'Black people are expected to 'stick together' in the face of challenge or difficulties' (Ogbu, 1991, p267). This following exchange demonstrates how this kinship is enacted by the participants:

> ZJ: *I've took your blame. I've took your blame plenty of times.*
> LM: *But I've took your blame.*
> ZJ: *There's even times out of college.*
> L1 Sports NVQ Focus Group lines 615-618

In addition to personal and emotional support provided to each other, there was also a high level of academic support given to peers. In contrast to emotional support which appeared to be reserved for peers who shared the same racial identity, academic support was offered to all peers in a reciprocal relationship, where other students, Black and white, were willing to offer and accept academic support. Here, in a complex system of friendship and support, Black students are simultaneously adopting the mantle of 'acting white' in striving for academic excellence, while at the same time enlisting the support of both Black *and* white peers so breaking out of a Black-only 'fictive kinship' group. This could be presented as a form of academic 'hustling'[5] whereby Black students are 'exploiting interpersonal relationships for material and non material benefits' (Ogbu, 1991, p265). However, hustling usually means exploiting 'non-conventional resources to tap into the "street economy" (ibid). In this situation Black students are accessing a conventionally valued resource (education) by conventionally accepted means (student self-help groups). It appears these Black students have successfully fused 'activities which are perceived as uncool' (Majors and Billson, 1992, p46) into a personalised hybrid, which allows them to persist academically and retain their credibility among their peers. In this instance Black students do not appear to be different from their academic white counterparts:

> HA: *People are helpful. If you miss a lesson and you ask someone for their notes or whatever, they're not going to say 'no'.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 676-677

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[5] Hustling – a mechanism or exploiting others for one's own personal advantage

LT: I don't think there's been a time yet when we've been doing assignments, and man has been stuck, no-one's been turned away.

LB: That's the thing with assignments. When you're proper stuck, someone always helps you.

L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 364-367

In this scenario, students can be seen to be actively engaged in an attempt to increase their personal standing within education by striving to obtain recognised qualifications. This desire to increase status by obtaining valued qualifications is consistent with Bourdieu's position regarding cultural capital in which individuals work to accrue cultural capital to facilitate their progression within structures and access to resources, in the knowledge that certain forms of capital, such as education qualifications, are accorded greater status than other forms of capital such as 'street knowledge'[6]. In this way it appears the research participants have implicitly understood Bourdieu's proposition of how education has the capacity to 'confer capital, particularly cultural capital, upon its participants' and how such 'qualifications tend to be highly valued' (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002, p 110) within education and in wider society. These students appear to be critically aware that within education, qualifications are a signifier of cultural capital and that those with greater amounts of this capital are usually more likely to be readily accepted and to be successful within these systems. Most of the research participants did not specifically identify why they wanted to acquire educational qualifications, beyond displaying a general, almost intuitive understanding of the importance of academic qualifications. However, some of the research participants, MS and EF in particular, (see section *6.5, Personal Motivation to Succeed*) were able to make the link between educational cultural capital and securing high status, well paid jobs or gaining places on higher level courses. Thus some participants were able to appreciate the link between gaining qualifications and the direct, tangible benefits such qualifications were capable of producing.

6.3.3 Family Support

The final support mechanism identified by the group was family, who were seen as always willing to help another family member. This view is supported by Figueroa and Nehaul who

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[6] Street knowledge – an understanding of the information needed to survive outside of the mainstream economy

found that 'Caribbean parents were keen that their children should get ahead in school' (1999, p18) and were advocates of academic learning. Parental and home support is not particular to Black groups and it is likely that other groups would express similar views. However, the importance of family support increases in significance if Black students believe that schools or colleges are either incapable of, or unwilling to provide them with the necessary support. Although my research did not support this view, other researchers (Ogbu 1991, Fordham1996, Sewell 1997, Blair 2001) found teachers in schools, and white teachers in particular, did not provide effective support to Black students. As a result some students felt in the absence of other useful mechanisms, family members were in the best position to provide support:

> *SN: Family, it's just family really.*
> L2 Business Focus Group line 401

The perceived difference in the quality of staff support at college and the ineffectiveness or inappropriateness of school staff support is not simply or easily explained and is likely to be created by a variety of factors, including institutional culture where it appears that colleges have purposely determined to present as culturally different from schools. Part of this difference is embodied in the way that staff behave when working with students. The different approach adopted by college staff could make the support offered by college tutors appear more acceptable to the student group, and in turn, they may be more willing to accept support offered. It is also important to note that in an inevitable biological bonus the students themselves have become older. This maturity may have given students the opportunity to reflect on their own personal goals and how these may be best achieved and may make accepting support easier.

In her research Channer found that religion was a significant support mechanism for young Black people, and asserted that the church:

> *environment gave the reinforcement needed to deal with the regular emotional and psychological "onslaught".*
> 1995, p106

Further, she found that 'many respondents reflected on the benefits of being a church member' (ibid, p105). However, none of the research participants in my study accepted this position. Even when asked the direct question about the role of religion in assisting students in their academic pursuits, did they consider this could be, or was, a relevant support system:

> *SN: Personally I go to church and they say you can go to them, but sometimes when problems are too personal, you don't feel secure to ask them. You just keep it to yourself.*
> L2 Business Focus Group line 403-405

Although the role of religion as a support mechanism was not explored in any depth in this research, the view expressed by SN is in direct opposition to Channer's research and questions whether religion can be 'a source of strength in (the) quest for academic success' (Channer, 1995, p111) for all young Black people. Further research would be needed to explore this question more fully.

In the previous discussion I have shown that although support mechanisms are accessed and used by Black males these can best be described as informal/self-help systems. Support is not formally planned and engineered, but organic and evolutionary, which may or may not be sufficient to meet the educational, social and emotional needs of these students. The general lack of use of college organised support systems is an interesting point to reflect upon. This aversion was demonstrated for academic support systems, like literacy and numeracy workshops and emotional support systems, such as counselling. There is no simple explanation for this position and it is more likely that this position had been produced by a range of factors. However, with regards to emotional support, and accepting student statements of feeling more confident working with someone of the same racial group, it may be that the lack of availability of Black counsellors made the service unattractive. However, this unwillingness to access college counselling services could equally be explained by gender differences as many college counsellors were female and white, and it is possible the Black male students may have been reluctant to discuss issues with a white woman. The issue of accessing college support thus has both racial and gender features, which could mean that as well as potentially excluding Black males, other client groups such as white males would also experience difficulties in accessing these services.

In the final analysis it appears that the Black males who participated in my research have had to work out their own support structures, and by a variety of means have plotted their own routes to success. Their other option was to leave their academic achievement to chance, and although as one Black male researcher states, 'the only thing that spared (me) the fate of so many of (my) brethren was luck' (Noguera, 2003, p433), the Black students involved in my inquiry appeared unwilling to adopt this fatalistic approach and chose instead to take positive steps to try an engineer their chances of success within education.

6.4 Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges

Staff in FE colleges play a significant role in shaping the students' experience of college. They represent both the gatekeepers of the qualifications that the students have attended college to obtain, and they are the enforcers of the college rules and regulations. As they are the group who remain constant, while student populations move on and are renewed, it is the college staff who are principally responsible for establishing and maintaining the ethos of the college. The students' relationship with this group is therefore critical, both in terms of their academic success while at college and in terms of how they are welcomed and made to feel part of the college community. For many students, the staff not only make the college what it is, they *are* the college.

The area of relationships with college staff generated some of the most heated discussion between the participants and they had much to say about both the academic staff in FE colleges and the other staff who worked there. The passions that were demonstrated in these discussions further support my original statement that staff play an important role in shaping the students' experience of college and the staff were perceived as significant in shaping this experience. In these discussions students made comparisons between college staff and school staff, for it was the difference between these groups, which made their relationship with these two staff groups comment worthy.

Many students reported on the fairness of the academic staff who worked within FE and of the 29 students who participated in the study, 13 chose to comment on this, making observations such as:

> *It's a lot different here, you see. I get treated a lot different. Everyone gets treated equal, and I really feel at home.*
> LB lines 97-98

While 13 students does not represent the majority of the research participants, at nearly half of the research cohort, it is a significant and sizeable minority. Implicit in LB's statement is an unfavourable comparison with his previous school, and, significantly the student actually makes the comment that the college is so welcoming that he feels at home. This statement was emphasised to an even greater extent by another student who stated that:

> *The welcome image is spot on and what makes it better even more is when you walk through that door you get that nice breeze and that makes it homely as well. You walk through, in from the cold, and you feel the nice breeze and you think 'Yeah I feel at home'.*
> JW lines 212-215

Although this student was speaking literally and referring to the air conditioning within this context the 'nice breeze' referred to presents an opportunity for an educational metaphor and for these students, the 'nice breeze' has come to signify a literal wind of change, in which the more welcoming atmosphere of FE is contrasted to previous hostile learning environments. The fairness that students witnessed extended beyond the initial welcome to include the manner in which staff offered assistance to students in the completion of their coursework, to ensure that all students had the opportunity of achieving and commented that:

> *JC: Say like, you've got to do a distinction 4 and some need a pass 6. Well obviously she's going to go to the pass 6 person.*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 145-146

This student did not view such staff behaviour as depriving him of an opportunity to complete distinction level work, rather he recognised it was the responsibility of academic staff to support all students within the cohort to achieve the qualification. And, at times, this might mean supporting less able learners. This parity of approach further extended to the way in which student volunteers were selected for activities or tasks by staff members, as exemplified in the following comment:

> *JC: Like if I volunteer, and he volunteers, if I got picked last time, why should I get*
> *picked again?*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 109-110

When reflecting on their school experiences, however, students were unable to report such equity of approach commenting that instead of being included, they were sometimes purposely overlooked:

> *LT: Yeah, like in school. Definitely that's what they always used to do.*
> *LB: Like no-one's got their hand up apart from you and it's like 'Right, no-one'*
> *LT: (laughs) I guess no-one wants to do it then.*
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 330-334

Significantly, the final comment generated laughter and nods of agreement among the entire group which appeared to indicate a frequent occurrence of such situations at school, and the blasé nature of some staff when intentionally excluding certain student populations. This almost incidental nature of exclusion echoes other research which discusses the marginalisation of minority ethnic students (see section *4.4 Social Positioning of Black Males in Secondary Schools and FE*). When discussing this issue, out of the entire cohort only one student actively reported being purposively overlooked while studying at college, but again this was in a context of staff wishing to be fair and equitable to the whole group:

> *JLF: 'Overlook me to answer questions'? That's happened to me a couple of times,*
> *but that's because I'm answering too many. It's not to stop me, it's to give someone*
> *else a chance. It's not negative as such as it's not always beneficial to everybody if*
> *you're answering all the questions.*
> L3 Focus Group lines 260-263

Once again, a single revealing comment regarding students' relationships with staff was succinctly summarised by the student who noted that:

> *CS: Everyone tries their best to be fair.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group line 483

This comment demonstrates an overt recognition on the part of the students of the efforts that staff made to try and ensure there was parity of treatment across the student population, and that all students were respected, valued and included.

Evidence from the photo-records provided a further positive endorsement of the staff at college and 'favourite' tutors were photographed. Students commented on the fairness of these staff choosing to describe them as 'safe' and 'nice'. Staff were valued as much for their ability to form genuinely caring human relationships, as or their ability to assist students' academic progress.

Although the majority of comments made regarding staff behaviour and attitudes were of a positive nature, there were a number of negative observations made relating to adverse stereotyping by some staff. This adverse stereotyping was displayed by a small, named group of tutors who students believed held negative attitudes towards students who wore 'hoodies[7]' or who were 'busting low batty'[8]. Students were concerned if they chose to dress in this manner they would also be viewed in the same negative light, and would be associated with anti-social or negative attitudes, as illustrated in the following exchange:

> *JLF: They're seeing two Black people, both dressed the same, and they jump to*
> *conclusions. If you dress the same, they normally jump to conclusions.*
> L3 Focus Group lines 277-278
>
> *CB: Some of them think they are rude boys wearing their trousers down.*
> *JG: Attitude.*
> *CB: Not respecting each other and stuff.*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 160-163

In terms of Black male youth culture and personal identity issues, such staff attitudes presented a conflict for some students who formed the opinion that to be accepted as 'serious' students they would have to sacrifice part of their personal identity construction and disassociate with a perceived 'thug' image. Such student perceptions echo the findings of

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[7] 'Hoodie' - a sports type top, with a large hood, usually worn over the head and favoured by many young people of all ethnicities

[8] 'Busting low batty' - contemporary youth slang for young people who wear their trousers well below their waist line

Rhamie and Hallam in which Black students recognised 'the negative stereotyped perceptions that white society often had of them' (2002, p159), and some students made a positive decision to adopt the accepted norms of the mainstream culture. This is exemplified in the following dialogue:

> *LB: I haven't worn a hood for…Well, I do the odd time, but not in that way if you know what I mean. I'm trying to change the way I act and the people I hang with.*
> *Int: Has that made a difference to the way people respond to you?*
> *LB: Yeah.*
> *Int: In what way?*
> *LB: Well, to me, it feels like they have more respect for me.*
> *Int: What, with or without the hood?*
> *LB: Without the hood, without the hat, the flat peak and the baggy trousers etc, etc.*
> *Int: So how do the rest of the young black men think about you, if you're leaving that stuff?*
> *LB: Well, a lot of people think I've changed. They think I'm becoming a pretty boy and all this stuff, but I'm not really bothered to tell you the truth. But a lot of my friends respect me because I'm sticking at college and stuff.*
> LB Lines 61-75

This particular approach raises a number of important issues. The student suggests young Black males who conform and 'behave in a manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference' (Fordham and Ogbu,1986, p181) are more likely to be shown respect. The extension of this logic is that college staff are more likely to respond positively to students who conform to a perceived conceptualisation of a 'good' student. Although it is not suggested that students are instructed by staff to adopt specified cultural norms, there was a real perception that some dress codes and culturally specific behaviours (i.e. those associated with Black culture) were not welcome within a college context. This, in turn, raised further issues of cultural dislocation, suggesting that academic success is more likely if young people choose to disassociate with some sectors of their own community. However, this decision puts students at personal risk as 'to try and cross cultural boundaries or to 'act white'' (ibid, p182) could result in students experiencing opposition or derision from their peers and community.

A further issue for consideration is that although Black students may feel compelled to dress in a particular manner in order to gain institutional approval and success, at the same time increasing numbers of white students choose to dress in Black street fashion to increase their credibility and kudos among their peers. The question here is, how do Black students manage this perceived 'cultural theft' by their white peers, and can white students as described by HA expect to be adversely treated by academic staff for making the decision to dress in Black street fashion?

> HA: *And now all the kids in West Bridgford they all trying to look like everyone.*
> *They're all trying to wear Nike this, sports gear.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 924-925

There is little research evidence available to indicate the consequences for white students choosing to adopt other cultural norms. However, in her research, Wright found that some Black students had asserted that white teachers claimed that associating with Black people 'change(d) you to bad' (Eggleston, Dunn, Anjali and Wright, 1986, p139). The logical extension of this argument could be that any white students choosing to associate with Black students, would receive the same treatment (and thus punishments) as Black students. However, this issue was not explored and was beyond the remit of this study.

Other students, however, saw dress as a point of cultural connection and pride and were not willing to change the way in which they dressed. Instead they preferred to maintain a visible link with their community and culture. Research from the USA indicates that for some Black students, dressing in a certain fashion was a positive assertion of Black culture and a physical affirmation of their 'brotherhood' and 'sisterhood' (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p183) with their Black peers – a connection which many participants were keen to maintain. Indeed, one student identified that attempts or suggestions to try and encourage him to dress differently would cause him personal difficulties and stated that:

> KB: *It's not really comfortable or anything. You're being told what to wear. It's not*
> *really showing you. It's trying to get everyone as a unit.*
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 286-287

Again, this student was asserting his perceived right to dress and behave in the way he chose. While needing to adopt a certain dress code might be said to be true of youth culture in general, the particular issue here is the student was signalling his need for Black street fashion he chose to wear (and by implication Black culture), to be accepted alongside white youth culture and other cultural positions accepted in college. These students are demonstrating a clear resistance to being required to dress in any way other than their own choice. There is a rejection of uniformity and a positive desire to assert their own Black identity (the issue of Black students chosen personal presentation is discussed in section *4.5 Black Students Presentation of Self in Secondary and FE Sectors*).

Although most students reported a positive relationship with staff there still remained a recognition that relationships with staff could be further improved if a greater number of Black staff were employed at colleges. This theme is returned to by students when they discussed support mechanisms available to students in college in the previous section, *6.3 Support Mechanisms in College:*

> *If there was more Black staff then I've got more people to talk to. You feel like if you talk to your tutor, I like my tutor 'cause she's nice, but if you talk to a Black tutor he'd probably back you a bit more, he wouldn't try and point the finger on you and stuff like that.*
>
> JS lines 131-135

This position is supported by Blair who found that students believed that 'interactions between white teachers and Black students were informed by stereotypes of Black people in films and the media' (2001, p81). Students believed that Black teachers would not hold these same, often negative, views as 'they understood the situation because they experience it themselves' (ibid).

Student/staff relationships are a critical aspect of the learning process. Staff, again, find themselves in a gate-keeping function and can either open up the curriculum and make it meaningful and accessible or can present barriers which hinder and impede students' understanding and development. In this way the learning process and the college curriculum are intrinsically linked to the teaching staff as they determine the students' level of access to the taught curriculum. It would be too easy and too simplistic to present this as a 'one-way

street' in which students were victims of incompetent or malevolent staff. It is important here to remember that students themselves have choices in regards to whether or not they choose to engage with their studies, or to conform to institutional expectations. Indeed, the students themselves could be 'active agents in their own failure' (Noguera, 2003, p437) through presenting a 'socially constructed' cool pose persona (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p189) which prevents them from participating in learning opportunities.

However, if students do not experience a positive relationship with staff, and are simultaneously managing the ambivalence of their constructed identities, then it becomes far harder for them to even begin to gain access to and understand the curriculum. In this instance, the messenger (the staff) have a critical role in making the message (the curriculum) accessible. The importance of positive staff relationships becomes even more critical when considered in the light of Montalvo, Mansfield and Miller's work (2007). In their study on culturally mixed groups (which included 22% African Americans) Montalvo, Mansfield and Miller found that 'a student's perception of the teacher as caring or uncaring influence(d) their level of engagement' and 'when students like(d) the teacher their effort and quality of work improve(d)' (ibid, p145) and they 'earned higher grades' (ibid, p154). If the messenger is not able to establish a positive working relationship and communicate effectively with the student audience, then the message may not be received or could be misinterpreted. If such positive and productive relationships are to exist, students need to believe that staff are actively interested in student progression and believe them to be capable of achieving success. This belief was clearly articulated by the Level 1 Sports Diploma group who spoke positively of a college tutor, who although adopted a sometimes challenging paternalistic approach to his work with the students, appeared to be genuinely for and with the students (see previous section *6.3 Support Mechanisms Available to Students while at College*). This is even more vital when considered in the context of 'cool pose' behaviours and for those students who hold a negative view of academic success believing school learning to be a 'one-way acculturation into the cultural frame of reference of the dominant group members of society' (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p201). These students are likely to require particular support to break out of 'peer-group relations and norms' (ibid) which oblige them to view academic learning as a facet of hegemonic oppression.

In some respects this represents one of the more problematic areas of this research. The 'cool pose' stance of some young Black males would suggest that they have decided they do not

wish to conform to the requirements of academia, and would prefer to retain their street credibility by operating outside of a scholarly arena. And yet, if Black males are not prepared to accept academia, at least to a degree, then their ability to make progress and achieve within the system will be difficult. This is a conundrum, and perhaps only through some degree of mutual compromise can progress be achieved.

The evidence from the focus group discussions demonstrates that staff/student relationships with staff in colleges were generally good and this was a positive feature of college life, that helped to create a welcoming atmosphere in which students felt supported and cared for. Students who took part in the research felt there were opportunities for them to progress and achieve. However, students believed this pivotal feature of college life could be further improved by the appointment of more Black teaching staff, who as a result of cultural connections, would have a greater understanding of the 'conflicts and ambivalence' (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p191) experienced by Black males striving to achieve academically. The solution of employing more Black staff to support the achievement of Black students has also been suggested in Sewell's research, where Mr Howard, a white teacher, felt that more Black teachers were needed in schools who could:

> *understand the street culture, who can empathise, relate to the Caribbean culture and*
> *understand how Caribbean people behave.*
> Sewell, 1997, p128

Both Sewell's and, to a degree, my own research appear to suggest that such Black staff would be in a better position to support Black students effectively, and to assist them to achieve. Unfortunately, the fluid nature of employment in the FE sector means that there is little hard data to confirm the total number of Black lecturers who work in the sector and would be in a position to support students. Data from 2002 produced by the Commission for Black Staff in Further Education found that while 'the percentage of Black learners ha(d) increased over recent years' the majority of 'colleges employ(ed) fewer than 5% Black staff' (Commission for Black Staff in FE, 2002, p25). With such continuing low representation it is hard to envisage how Sewell's suggestion could become a reality.

However, even the strategy of appointing more Black staff could be unsuccessful for some Black students, as these staff might be perceived as occupying the 'undesired status of book-

Blacks – individuals whose appearance is African but whose world view might not be' (Fordham, 1996, p218). In more recent times, the street jargon has changed to refer to this group as 'coconuts' or Bounties[9], which alludes to being brown on the outside and white on the inside. 'Book-Blacks' are viewed as having surrendered their Black identity to the dominant white hegemony, effectively transforming themselves into the enemy, and as such it would be unlikely that these Black staff would be accepted as a useful or appropriate source of support by some Black students.

In this section I have discussed the ways in which students and staff worked together within the college environment. Many students gave positive reports of the relationships and were able to confirm how staff worked with them in a supportive and helpful way. However, it is important to note this was not a universal experience, and some staff still displayed a tendency to negatively stereotype Black students, particularly if they dressed in a certain fashion. This put some students in the uncomfortable position of feeling they needed to choose between their culture and their studies. Some students and Sewell's research suggests that this position might be improved by appointing more Black tutors, but this was not viewed as a guarantee to improving staff/student relationships.

6.5 Personal Motivation to Succeed

I will use this next section to explore the issue of personal motivation and self-determination in greater detail and to assess how these young males had moved into this position of autonomy. It is not possible to say how widespread this personal determination to succeed was among the research participants, but there is supporting evidence that some Black males make choices 'outside the cultural milieu in which they were raised' (Noguera, 2003, p440) and find ways of asserting their agency as a means of countering negative 'structural and cultural forces' (ibid). The reasons for this self reliance are not wholly clear, however, it is possible to speculate that some students have learned to distrust formal education as it does not provide rewards 'commensurate with their educational efforts and accomplishments' (Ogbu1991, p283). For these students, one possible strategy to persist and succeed in education is to become self-reliant or to locate alternative useful support mechanisms (see section *6.3 Support Mechanisms Available to Students while at College*). Whatever the reason for this situation, which was not explored within the scope of this research, it appears

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[9] Bounty = popular confectionary with chocolate coating and coconut centre

that the research participants as a group, very much felt that one of the ways for them to succeed in education was through high levels of personal motivation and learning to rely on themselves and their own resources. This was usefully summarised by JS and MS:

> *JS: I just make the effort on my own behalf. I'm not really bothered what the college thinks of me. As long as I get my thing at the end of the year…I come here for my own benefit and to make my mum happy. Not just to make my mum happy, 'cause I'm doing it on my own behalf as well, but I want to make her happy on top of it.*
> JS lines 120-125

> *MS: I'm here to learn and leave. That's what I'm here for. I'm here basically to get the knowledge that is in the teacher's head into mine. That's the only thing I'm interested in.*
> L3 Focus Group lines 364-366

However, some students appeared to suggest that personal motivation in itself, although useful, may not be sufficient to secure success, and an almost blinkered bloody-mindedness was needed to succeed. This resolute self-determination to achieve against the odds was developed by another student who commented in the following way:

> *EF: I've got my own determination not to fall by the wayside, and be like everyone else, and just have a normal job and work in an office. I've got a goal, and even though it might take a while to reach that and go through many steps, I think I will because this is just one of the steps I need to do.*
> EF lines 168-171

This comment reveals a deep complexity in thought. EF did not specify his comments related exclusively to males, so on this occasion his words are taken to apply to all Black people. Firstly it appears this student appeared to believe that Black people commonly fell by the wayside; secondly many Black people could expect no more from life than the mundane; and thirdly for Black people to achieve at all they could routinely expect to go through 'many steps'. While it could be suggested that any long term goal would require multiple stages, the implication here was even when Black people have ability and ambition they can expect to take much longer to achieve their goals than their white counterparts. This belief is not without substance. Although it might be suggested such a view could be representative of

any young person, the race dimension adds a further significance to EF's statements. Black people 'learn about the job ceiling quite early in life from observing their unemployed and underemployed parents, older siblings, relatives, family friends and other adults' (Ogbu, 1991, p280) and there is an acknowledgement of limited or curtailed opportunities. Although the other Black students in my research did not replicate EF's observations, the research work of Obgu (1991) Aymer and Okitikpi (2002) serve to substantiate this claim.

This situation has not substantially changed since 1991, and when Black people do succeed in education, they can still expect to counter significant difficulties. Research by Aymer and Okitikpi has shown an African-Caribbean graduate 'is more than twice as likely to be unemployed as a white person with A levels (and) African men with degrees are seven times more likely to be unemployed as white male graduates' (2002, p7).

Within this context it can be seen that this student's comment is both perceptive and insightful, and it recognises that frequently Black people need to apply extra effort and can expect to take much longer to achieve their goals, if at all. The idea of needing to be better appears to be deeply embedded within Black culture, or as one parent proclaimed in other research 'You must remember you are Black, you have to be a bit cleverer, one above them' (Maylor, Ross, Rollock and Williams, 2006, p63).

Whereas school had for most of this group, been viewed as a hostile environment to be survived (Eggleston et al, 1986), college was seen as a facility that offered new chances and new opportunities to succeed and students positively chose to study at college. This choice is important, for it represents students taking control of their own learning and the learning process, and moving from a position of being directed and controlled to a position of taking responsibility for their own actions and their life trajectory:

> KB: Basically at college you make your own decisions.
> KHa: If you wanna be here, you wanna be here.
> KB: Exactly.
> KHa: You've got to determine your own success.
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 575-578

> MS: That's where college comes in, because you're here basically, to better yourself.
> L3 Focus Group lines 461-462

By acting in this way these students had made a positive choice to reject a Boudieusian assumed/imposed habitus where they have 'adjust(ed) their expectations with regard to the capital they are likely to attain in terms of the 'practical' limitations imposed on them by their place in the field' (Webb, Shirato an Danaher, 2002, p23). Instead they have elected to try and increase their position and standing in the field by refusing to agree to the 'deep-structur(ed) cultural matrix that generates self-fulfilling prophecies' (Swartz, 1997, p104) and would oblige them to accept 'the limited opportunities that previously existed for their success in school' (ibid).

However, despite this drive to succeed, and even with high levels of positive motivation, some students found they experienced difficulties in maintaining motivation, and on occasions quite simply lacked the physical energy necessary to continue with their studies, and learners commented in the following way:

> *JW: Everybody has one of them days, don't they? Where you wake up and you just can't be bothered. You're just fed up.*
> L2 Sports Focus Group lines 394-395

> *CS: Sometimes you just have to grit your teeth and work through it. And sometimes I won't lie; I'm struggling to stay awake, like my head on the table and not even looking.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 330-332

If this student behaviour is coupled with the negative attitudes that some staff display towards Black students, this could produce a significant breakdown in staff/student communication, and might lead staff to formulate a different view on student ability, or reasons for wanting to be at college. Although the research did not produce a wealth of data in this area, the findings are nonetheless significant, as they provide evidence that within the context of educational marginalisation and failure in the statutory sector, numbers of Black students are able to remain positive about education and have pro-education views, viewing it as an opportunity for career and personal advancement. This positive attitude is significant for it sits uncomfortably with the popular stereotype of Black males being education resistant low achievers. An alternative explanation for Black student disengagement within the statutory

sector, could be that Black students have experienced an education that is unresponsive to, and dismissive of their needs.

The academic seriousness of the research cohort was further emphasised by the frequent occurrence of photographs of the library taken by students, which they identified as a place of study. Two of the students also chose to acclaim their own efforts and photographed their college work books. This attitude towards learning is consistent with a pro-education position discussed earlier in this section.

I have used this section to demonstrate that one of the factors sustaining Black males and enabling them to persist and continue with their studies, within some negative learning environments, is their own self belief. And, in spite of being in negative and often hostile environments, Black students are able to remain within and even to succeed, as a result of their sheer, gritted self-determination. However, 'it would be naive and erroneous to conclude that strength of character and the possibility of individual agency can enable one to avoid the perils present within the environment' (Noguera, 2003, p440). To combat these dangers a wider view needs to be taken, that looks afresh at issues, develops existing successful approaches and searches for new and innovative strategies that can support Black males to achieve.

6.6 The Difference between College and School

The difference between school and college has been a theme which has permeated throughout this research, either by implication, or by direct statement. While the observations made by the participants in this research may not be representative of *all* schools and *all* colleges, the similarities of the participants' observations appear to suggest there are some common ideas shared between the research participants relating to colleges and schools. I will use this section to consider these differences in greater detail; to explore other emergent themes; and to draw these issues together.

Many students reported that their enjoyment of College life was because it was very different from school. The 'fresh start, new chance' ideology of further education (Green and Lucas, 2000) became their reality and the research participants were clear that their experience of college was in sharp contrast to their life at school. Many students reported a general feeling of dissatisfaction with school. On occasions some students perceived the treatment they

received was influenced by racist undertones. This indeterminate, covert racism was difficult to specifically identify and isolate, but students were left with a feeling that because of their race they were on the receiving end of hostile and unfair treatment:

> *HA: I felt let down by school, definitely. I feel like I wasn't treated like the rest at all when I was there. My mum used to say that 'I know it's bad, but you gotta realise that you're the only mixed race, black student out of all your friends, and you're bigger than everyone else and you're loud as well, so you're gonna stand out'.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 194-198

> *Int: Do you think in anyway they (the college staff) treat you differently because of your ethnicity?*
> *LB: No. No I don't. I did find that at my old school, but coming here to where they treat you a lot different. No, not at all. I haven't had no like, kind of, hints or anything like that since I've been here, which I'm quite happy about, 'Cause coming from my last school there was a lot of 'unfair treatment' shall I say.*
> LB lines 30-34

The comments above indicate some students held the belief they had experienced repeated unfair treatment while at school linked to their ethnicity. These comments are not surprising as Ofsted found that while most secondary schools had equal opportunities, multicultural and anti-racist policies in place is was 'rare to find clear procedures for monitoring their implementation' (Ofsted, 1999, p13). Even now there is evidence that these damaging 'racial stereotypes of Black people as "uneducated" and "underachievers"' (Maylor, Ross, Rollock and Williams, 2006, p63) still persist in education, and Black students still experience unfair discrimination by teachers. In this laissez-faire climate, Ofsted further found that in schools 'racial taunting is widespread and a regular fact of life for many minority ethnic pupils' (Ofsted, 1999, p13). It appears for the research participants that without rigorous implementation strategies, equal opportunities policies had become paper documents with little or no real meaning for them in their daily lives. In contrast, the students' new life at college gave them a real opportunity to put this phase of their life behind them and rather than having to defend themselves, they now had an opportunity to concentrate on their studies and to pursue academic interests. However, 'racist name-calling, harassment and stereotyping' was also found to be commonplace in some colleges and 'many colleges had no

effective polices or planned training in this area' (Commission for Black Staff in FE, 2002, p62). Thus although the research participants perceived they received better treatment in FE, this appears to be in spite of, rather than because of, any planned, strategic management of race relations by college staff or management teams.

It appears it is the frontline practitioners rather than any internal college committee or policies that are responsible for shaping the students' experience of college. This in many respects is wholly plausible, for it is the college staff who represent the public presentation of the college and it is their attitudes and behaviours which primarily influence the students' experience. Although race awareness training could help to promote positive attitudes and behaviours, it appears that even without such training staff attitudes were generally supportive towards Black students.

In addition to the perceived racist atmosphere of schools, students also reported hostile and unfavourable treatment from staff where aggression and humiliation were commonplace. Although this was not always necessarily linked to race, students expressed a belief that their high profile and visibility in schools put them in a position where they could, almost inevitably, expect to experience a greater proportion of such treatment:

> *MW: They treat you more adultish. They don't shout in your face when you're wrong.*
> *Int: What do they do when you're wrong?*
> *MW: Just put you right or tell you. Take you to one side and talk to you, instead of trying to make a scene in front of everyone. That's what is seemed like at school. They'd try to make a show of you.*
> MW lines102-107

> *Int: So if you had to compare the teachers here with the teachers at school, how are things?*
> *KHa: They treat you more like adults and less like a kid, even though you are a kid. They've got more respect for you as a person, rather than…I don't know it's just different. They're not as cheeky either as teachers.*
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 529-533

The perception that staff needed to 'make a show' of students further fits with the notion of controlling students as though a virtual gaoler, where public shows are used as a mechanism of controlling larger numbers, by selecting individuals to be made an example of, and to demonstrate to the rest of the populace what treatment insubordination would produce. The word 'cheeky' also requires further explanation in this context. For this group of students cheeky does not mean 'loveable' or 'roguish' but is the same 'cheeky' that students referred to in Wright's research (1986, see section *6.1 The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges*). It signifies an over familiarity by staff, bordering on dismissal, where the views and opinions of young people are not taken seriously and are not valued. In this sense, 'cheeky' is not a term of endearment, it is a term which identifies staff as overstepping professional work boundaries in the ways that they speak to and relate with students. Again, this hostility was succinctly summarised by one student who stated that:

> *JS: In school they just treat you like… Talk to you like shit.*
> L2 Sports Focus Group line 290

This view is in stark contrast to the care and concern that students believed college staff displayed, almost to the point of treating students as members of a wider extended family. This perception of care by staff beyond perfunctory requirements, is *a key finding* of this research. Black students believed themselves to be valued, and further believed staff actually cared about them, so the potential threat of being treated in a dismissive manner was minimised or completely removed. While at school, students felt they had no option but to tolerate such negative and dismissive staff attitudes. The move to college, however, signalled a change in students' acceptance of such behaviours and they were clear that they would not allow themselves to be treated in such a manner now that they considered themselves young adults. Students now held a clear sense of their own self-worth and were certain about their value as individuals:

> *JG: The way you get talked to at school, I don't think I'd allow it now. A teacher*
> *here couldn't talk to me how I used to get spoken to at school.   Teachers used to*
> *speak down to you and stuff.*
> L2 Business Focus Group line 308-310

The negative treatment routinely meted out by staff in schools contrasted sharply with their treatment in college. Students now felt that staff in college actively worked in such a way to ensure equality and parity among all student groups:

> *LB: They treat you, they treat everyone as equal. Full stop. That's what I think.*
>
> *Int: And how does that compare with school?*
>
> *LB: A lot different. I found a lot of not, yeah, I could say racism when I was going through school. Like it was race all the time. But when you came to college you don't get any of that.*
>
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 568-573

The word 'equal' here requires further explanation. Within a dominant white culture treating 'everyone as equal' could easily be interpreted as treating everyone as white. However, the meaning of equal here is about according equal worth to all students. Students were not so naive as to believe that staff were colour-blind, rather the equality ensured their difference was recognised and catered for. As such staff at college were perceived in a different light by the students who viewed staff to be both *for* the students and *like* the students, as the quotation below illustrates:

> *JW: The way the teachers carry on is completely different to school. The teachers are more like us in a way.*
>
> *TB: Ah yeah.*
>
> *JW: And they treat you like equals. And we call the teachers by first names and that's one thing that helps.*
>
> *TB: It's about respect.*
>
> *JW: If I'm calling him 'Sir' or 'Mr This, Mr That'.*
>
> *JS: They're in a higher place.*
>
> *JW: They're in a higher place.*
>
> *JS: It's more equal.*
>
> *JW: Even Julie (the course tutor) told us not to look up to her. She's got respect for us and she's on the same level as us.*
>
> L2 Sports Focus Group lines 543-554

> *LA: The teachers at school are different to the teachers at college as well.*

JC: Teachers at school will shout at you.

LA: They don't really seem to want to help. They don't really seem to care.
Teachers at college, they care. But teachers at school just let you do what you want,
and they don't try and motivate you.

L2 Business Focus Group lines 199-203

Words that have appeared repeatedly in the last three sets of student dialogue and have featured throughout student exchanges, are: *equal, respect* and *care*. These three words provide a useful encapsulating iteration of the students' view of college life. College, for the research participants, very much signalled a new beginning. A beginning in which, now confident of their own self worth, and with the threat of humiliation and hostility apparently removed, the participants could begin to engage with education in a meaningful fashion, and could (for the first time for some of the participants) begin to take advantage of the potential benefits afforded through educational opportunities.

Although the research participants were positive about the staff/student relationships they experienced at college, research suggests that this is not the case for all Black students studying in FE. A 2002 Report for the Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, found that:

> *African-Caribbean and Asian boys were most likely to be typecast as aggressive or*
> *confrontational. This was highlighted by the evidence of a group of Black learners*
> *who spoke eloquently of the "rude and disrespectful" behaviour of some security*
> *guards and the negative perceptions of some staff.*
>
> Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, 2002, p55

Some students who participated in the Commission's research also stated that 'the teaching and support they received was less than effective due to tutors' low expectations' (ibid) of Black students. Here again is evidence to suggest not all Black students enjoy a positive FE experience, and that there is need for further work in colleges to ensure all students receive fair and equitable treatment.

A further key difference between college and school, was the expectation that once students were at college they should and would take responsibility in managing their own behaviour.

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Academic staff made it clear that they did not see themselves in a policing role, and that students should, of their own accord, adopt acceptable practices and behaviours while in college and conform to college rules and regulations. A default outcome of this practice was that students did not feel that they were harassed or chased by college staff, in the same way as they had experienced while studying at school. This was expressed by two students in the following way:

> *CS: At the school I went to they were horrible. Well like they weren't horrible but it was like some teacher on your back every day, and it was like that over and again. And they just get you more stressed and it makes you less want to do the work and less want to be in school. So...Now you're at college it's more up to you innit? So you feel more responsibility on your own half, and you don't get spoon-fed, nothing really. So it's more independent.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 160-165

> *KHa: Where it's different from school is like no-one is monitoring. I mean they are monitoring, but if you don't come to your lessons, you don't come to your lessons. It's your choice to do what you want to do.*
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 68-70

This new found responsibility was not seen in a negative light, rather it was accepted as a difference in the way in which the two sectors operated, and was recognised as one of the ways in which their maturity was acknowledged. It was viewed more as an endorsement of their adult status, rather than a lack of interest in student progress. While students in this research generally described better staff relations at college than they experienced at school, this position is not true of all schools and Ofsted have reported some schools where staff 'were approachable and would give them (the students) a fair hearing if things went wrong' (Ofsted, 2002, p14). However, for the students involved in my research it appears they were not fortunate enough to attend schools like this.

One of the most telling divisions between school and college was the inclusion of goodwill and humour in college life. At school students expressed a view that academic work and enjoyment were mutually exclusive categories, perhaps reflecting a more traditional view that 'it was considered unscholarly to use humour as a teaching strategy' (Korobkin, 1988, p154) and some of the group felt they needed to choose between one or the other, often to the

detriment of their academic studies. This dichotomy was not experienced at college and students felt they could comfortably, and confidently, accommodate both humour and study. College tutors and the college curriculum did not force students into to same choice of 'work or play', but sought to unite the two features together in a symbiotic relationship, as shown in the following dialogue:

> *LB: You can have fun here. It's not like a joke, like at school.*
> *LT: That's the thing. At school you choose **either** to have a laugh or work. At college you have a laugh **and** work.*
> *LB: You know what I mean.*
> *Int: Why do you have a laugh and work here? Why didn't you have a laugh and work at school?*
> *LB: It wasn't like that. It's one or the other man.*
> L1 Sports Diploma Focus Group lines 66-72
> (my emphasis added in text)

> *KB: Joke in school was someone busting a joke and everyone laughing. Joke here is the teacher joining in a lickle bit, the students all laughing, then it calms down again.*
> *KHa: Yeah, yeah.*
> *KB: It's 'cause frequently we have joke here, so no-one gets too hyper, 'cause they know it's alright.*
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 562-67

Here, humour was being used positively in the way suggested by Woods (1976) and by encouraging students to work 'to enhance the learning environment' (Garner, 2006, p179). In this example humour has been nurtured to help 'lower tension, boost student morale and increase student attentiveness' (Torok, McMorris and Lin, 2004, p18) and so harness the positive, productive benefits of humour (see also section *6.1 The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges*). Interestingly in this example, unlike the conformists in Sewell's study, students did not feel that they had to break rank with their peers and humour helped them to 'embrace both the values of school and of their own Black peer group' (Sewell, 2004, p104).

In addition to the more liberal approach to classroom and student management, my observations revealed that some tutors went even further in creating a different learning environment and:

- Played background music while teaching, and;
- Female tutors were not agitated or aggrieved at being called 'love' or 'darling'.

Again, this emphasises the difference between college and school. I would suggest that it is rare for teachers in schools to play music in their sessions, although art and drama may be notable exceptions in some schools. I would further suggest that even if music is played, it would not regularly occur in an academic theory session, nor would it be music by R Kelly, Tupac or Chicane, which students could relate to and identify with. Once more here is a clear division between colleges and schools, and once more, it is another way in which learning is promoted and supported by staff.

I also wish to draw attention in this section to the way students were comfortable to address female tutors as 'love' or 'darling'. It is likely that had the students adopted such unorthodox behaviour while in schools, they would have, at the very least, attracted negative, possibly punitive attention, and such over familiarity may even warranted disciplinary sanctions. However, within the FE environment, many female tutors made no attempt to draw attention to these comments. Indeed, the female tutors I spoke to regarding this behaviour gave the impression they would rather concentrate on student learning, or if necessary, more significant behavioural issues. This approach, minimised the significance of the comments in themselves, and certainly avoided the occurrence of confrontation between students and staff. Consequently, staff attention was not directed towards relatively minor misdemeanours associated with hierarchical structures, and allowed staff to concentrate supporting students in completing their work or managing more serious transgressions.

A possible further interpretation of this situation, is that as recorded earlier in this study, many students stated that the felt 'at home' within the college environment and felt some degree of 'familial' attachment to their tutors. The using of these terms could therefore represent a further extension of this position, so that students began to use terms of address that would ordinarily be reserved for family members or close female friends. It is even possible that such comments were also intended as simple compliments.

Another key difference between school and college was the lack of choice of subjects to study. This was not linked by the students to the statutory requirements of the national curriculum and key stage four, but was simply viewed as a restrictive and repressive measure. This belief demonstrates a lack of awareness by the students of the restrictions imposed on schools, but conversely by the same token, in this sense colleges have an in-built advantage over schools as they can allow the students a greater degree of choice in their studies, leading students to comment that:

> *CS: You didn't get a choice whether you could do technology or not. I hated being in school for them reasons.*
>
> *Int: So the choice was too restricted?*
>
> *CS: It was definitely too restricted.*
>
> *HA: Definitely.*
>
> *CS: Now you come to college and you want to do this, this, this and this and they say 'Well this is your timetable'-done. And if you can't do certain things you've always got a big, vast selection you can choose from after that anyway, so if you can't do this, you can do this.*
>
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 829-837

A consequence of these differences was the students who took part in the research felt a strong sense of affinity towards FE. This was very clearly demonstrated by the photo-records produced by the students and images of either the front of the college or the college logo were photographed by all the students who produced photo-records and all students declared a strong loyalty to the organisation. As each of the students had spent a considerable time at the college, this affinity is in some ways understandable; yet many of the students had spent a similar amount of time in their secondary schools and this same apparent connection did not exist. The feelings that the students expressed about the college were further confirmation of their attachment to the institution, and students felt that the college was deserving of such loyalty for the opportunities and chances that the college had given to them – opportunities that some of this group perceived they had been denied while at school. A selection of images taken by students to represent life in college are included in appendix 3.

Much was made of the welcome that the college provided, and students photographed images they perceived symbolised the college's efforts to welcome a broad cross section of society. These images included the adaptive aids for students with disabilities and the multilingual 'welcome' banner displayed in the students' centre. The inclusive welcome approach was supported by all students who viewed the efforts of the college in this endeavour in a positive light. Perhaps, for them, it was a further demonstration of the end of marginalisation and indicated that *all* students regardless of race, ability or gender could expect to be accepted in a college environment.

In her research in schools Wright (1986), observed that Black students sought to colonise and claim certain areas within the school. However, in relation to student social spaces in this research, I did not observe any evidence of exclusive student occupation of any particular area. Within the first urban college there was little in the way of institutionally provided social areas, and students instead created their own social spaces, and I have recorded within my field journal that:

> *There seems to be no clear territorial claims by Black male students on any particular part of the college.*
> Field Notes 11 November, 2005

This observation is not consistent with Wright's findings. The reason for this apparent difference in behaviour between schools and colleges, might be that the institutional culture of colleges is so different from schools that students felt more relaxed and no longer found it necessary to behave in such a marked territorial fashion.

I have used this section to describe the key differences, as perceived by the research participants, between schools and FE. After feeling let-down by the provision in schools, the research participants found that colleges provided a more agreeable environment for their learning. My research suggests that for the research participants these differences were real, apparent and *felt*. However, other research (see Report of the Commission for Black Staff in FE, 2000) does not support this position and not all students have a positive college experience. On the basis of this small scale research it would be premature and naive to suggest that colleges usually 'get it right' and schools usually 'get it wrong', however, it appears to indicate that there could be a number of differences between the two sectors which

have a significant effect on the experiences of Black males, and led them to form very different opinions of the two sectors. How common the experience of the research participants was to the wider Black community and how frequently Black male students enjoyed a positive FE experience would need to be confirmed by further research.

6.7 Racism in Schools, FE Colleges and Wider Society

All members of the group interviewed were critically aware of race and the impact that it had on them and how it influenced the chances they would receive in society. For them race acted as 'a filter through which they interpreted the world' (Ofsted, 2002, p15). Most of the student cohort interviewed had strong feelings that race had played a significant role in their school experience. Indeed for some participants, there was a perception that both some staff and some students in their schools held racist views. The students' belief that their peers and tutors held such racist views created tensions between student cohorts of different ethnicities, producing a factionalised student population that used race as one of the key constructs of their identity:

> *CS: At my school there was a lot of racial tensions. In my school a lot of the teachers had like certain...There were always tensions between Black and mixed race and the Asian students as well. There were always them tensions. And there was a racial bias that the Asian students got. I felt that the Asian students got better treatment than the Black students did.*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 842-846

Significantly, students did not appear to hold the same perceptions of most college staff (see section *6.4 Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges*) who did not appear to express the same racial biases of their school teachers. There was a general student perception that college staff worked hard to ensure parity of treatment across all student populations, and students were not selected out or treated unfavourably because of their ethnicity, so that the participants made the following observations:

> *CS: Now I'm at college there's not them biases. I don't know 'cause that's all I've got to compare to where there was very strong racial bias. Now I'm at college it don't really matter as much but it was a big part of when I was in school .*
> L3 A1/A2 Focus Group lines 854-857

> *JS: In my old school you used to get picked on because of your race all the time. You did this because you're Black and all that. But here you don't get that.*
> JS lines 140-142

Although there was a general acceptance that racist attitudes and behaviour from staff were absent, this same belief did not hold true of the student population, and students still experienced racist behaviour from some of their peer group, commenting:

> *KHa: Before they know they put you into one group, one column quickly, before they even know what they're talking about, before they even know you.*
> *KB: It's like they're quick to stereotype.*
> *KHa: Yeah, stereotype. It's like because he's Black or something, he's gonna be like that.*
> *KB: Exactly.*
> *Int: So is that students or is that staff?*
> *KHa: That's just students. They shouldn't really say stuff when they don't know what they are talking about.*
> L2 Art Focus Group lines 326-334

This stereotyping led some students into making false accusations of their Black peers and identifying them as perpetrators of acts they did not commit, as is illustrated in the following exchange:

> *LA: Her purse went missing, and rather than asking us if we knew anything about it she's gone and started saying it was us.*
> *JC: She's gone straight to the teacher and said our names.*
> *LA: And when she's got home at night she's found it. She hasn't come and apologised or nothing.*
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 340-345

In protection against the persistence of racist attitudes and negative beliefs of some peers, many Black students chose their friendship groups on the grounds of race and formed mono-cultural or all-Black friendship groups, promoting once again the notion of 'fictive kinship'.

A further gendered stereotype of Black males was also apparent in that some white females actively chose to avoid forming friendships with Black males. The reasoning behind this was not apparent, although Sewell (1997) indicates that Black males are sometimes perceived as over-sexualised and therefore 'inappropriate' friends of white girls, leading to some white girls choosing to avoid Black males altogether, thus:

> LM: *Some of the gal are stuck up.*
>
> ZJ: *You can't say that.*
>
> LM: *Yeah they are. You know they are.*
>
> DC: *It's 'cause they don't want a man.*
>
> LM: *They're walking around college, having a laugh, and as soon as you say 'You alright ladies?' they just look at you and carry on walking. You get me?*
>
> NR: *They know you want one thing.*
>
> LM: *I just want to know her name. There's nothing wrong with that.*
>
> L1 Sports NVQ Focus Group 575-582

> JC: *That girl's arrogant.*
>
> LA: *Who?*
>
> JC: *You know, that girl. She thinks she's too nice.*
>
> LA: *What gal?*
>
> JC: *We always see her man. She's stuck up as well.*
>
> L2 Business Focus Group lines 249-253

Black males interpreted this avoidance as an aloofness, and could not appreciate why they would be spurned in this way, choosing to interpret it as a snobbish, class-based response. While this interpretation may be true, and there may have been class-based reasons for this rejection, it is interesting to note that these young men did not consider there could have been a racialised perspective involved, and they did not appear to recognise they may have presented as a threat.

In a final assessment of racism in society, students observed that as a Black person it was likely that the all-prevailing and pervasive nature of racism made everything harder and more difficult in life for them. The impact of racism in society was comprehensively summarised by one student who stated that:

JW: What colour you are matters. If you're Black it makes an impact. Life's harder being Black. No matter how hard you put a smile on your face, you're going to have to work extra hard to please somebody. My mum says to me 'As a Black youth in a white society you're going to have to work extra hard'. A white person will put in the same work, but you're going to have to put in double effort to get somewhere in life. JW lines 143-148

In this section I have endeavoured to demonstrate how race, as denoted by skin colour, was considered by many of the research participants as an inevitability from which there was no escape, and that Black people can expect life to work against them in their efforts to achieve. Many of the participants believed the all pervasive nature of racism was so great, that in order to achieve anything at all, additional effort was an absolute pre-requisite for all Black people. Racism not only routinely hindered Black people's life chances but, to a degree, it pre-determined them.

6.8 The Significance of Friendship Groups

The significance of friendship groups was a new theme, related to support mechanisms, that was most clearly evidenced from the photo-records collected by some of the research participants. The four students who participated in the collection of photo-records had collectively been in the first urban college for a period of 12 years. Although on a standard linear progression two of these students could have expected to be studying at HE at the time the research took place, the protracted nature of their studies meant that the earliest any of the students could expect to reach HE would be Autumn 2008. To echo issues identified in section *6.5 Personal Motivation to Succeed,* these students needed to 'work extra hard' and 'put in double effort to get somewhere'. Some of the images the participants photographed can be seen in appendix 3. These images have been selected to give an indication of how students perceived college life, while not compromising the confidential nature of this research, or identifying any of the research participants or other college users.

Two friendship- related themes, which were not immediately apparent from the other research techniques, were surfaced through this technique. These were the paramount importance of friendship groups and the welcome presence of female students. Although the

focus groups had suggested that friends were an important aspect of college life, and were the primary mechanism whereby students resolved any difficulties they were experiencing, the real significance of the importance of friends was most vividly revealed through the photo-records. Friends served as a key support mechanism to assist students both in their academic work and in their social discourses. This was clearly emphasised in the photographs the students took, and all students had included photographs of their friends and peers. Many of these images represented an idealised image of college life with the students smiling broadly at the camera and appearing relaxed and content. All students agreed that although they were at college to obtain a qualification and had plans to progress onto further study, the presence of a supportive peer group was an important feature of college life for them.

This was further evidenced by the photographs they chose to take which echoed comments made in the focus groups and showed images of students with their Black male peers. Thus photographs were used as another medium to emphasise the importance of racial identity and solidarity among peers.

The presence of female students was an attractive and important feature of attending college for this group of Black male students. Three of the group chose to include images of their female peers in their photographs. The one student who did not was a mature student who had returned after a period in full-time employment, and was seven years older than the other students. Although not directly articulated by this research participant the age difference between him and the majority of the other research participants may have been a contributory factor in the choice of his images.

The images of females selected are of interest and relates to issues regarding Black masculinities. Most of the photographs here were of white females. On a numerical basis, white females would in any event outnumber the Black females in the college, however, there appeared to be a purposeful selection of white girls when photographing females. This, however, could be seen to be at odds with their experience of some white female students who, appeared to actively distance themselves from Black males (see *6.7, Racism in Schools, Colleges and Wider Society*, in the previous section). A general observation made about meeting girls was that it was better to meet girls in college as their attendance was evidence to the male students that the girls had academic ambition and were also intent on achieving. The desire to associate with motivated and achieving women could be seen as consistent with

the self-motivation that the Black males themselves had displayed. This is discussed further in section *6.5, Personal Motivation to Succeed*.

Whereas racial identity and racial solidarity among Black males was a significant feature in their lives in college, the same racial solidarity between males did not appear to readily extend to Black females. Only one member of the group chose to photograph Black females, in an extension of solidarity that crossed gender boundaries. My inquiry does not provide clear reasons for this elective distance. However, other research (see, for example Tikley, Haynes, Caballera, Hill and Gillborn, 2006) shows that Black women frequently academically outperform their Black male counterparts, and consequently may have been studying on different courses. A fuller discussion of this difference is described in section *4.3 Academic Location of Black Males in the Secondary and FE Sectors*. Additionally Fordham and Ogbu found that 'female high achievers work to maintain low profiles' (1986, p196), and appear to have consciously chosen to disassociate with their Black male peers, some of whom would have had higher profiles with the college. It would therefore appear that, as part of their efforts to almost invisibly navigate the education system, some Black women preferred to maintain their distance from their more prominent Black male peers. Consequently it is not so much that Black males have chosen not to photograph and associate with Black females, rather Black females had decided to remain apart from Black males as they progressed through a perceived hostile education system, although the evidence presented in this study is somewhat tentative.

An alternative, simpler explanation to this scenario is that as a result of their previous success within education, Black females were now studying on other more advanced programmes. As a result of timetabling, rooming and other constraints it may been difficult for Black females to find the opportunity to associate with their Black male peers. A further explanation to this situation is, at the time I completed this research, the Black females in the first urban college, presented as self-confident, assertive young women who did not appear to be over-awed by their Black male peers. This study has not considered the expected gender roles and presentations of Black males and Black females, but it is possible that such confident young women may have appeared challenging or non-compliant to the Black males who participated in my research and may have been viewed as presenting a direct challenge to their masculinity and perceived dominance.

In this section, I have shown how a key feature of college life was having friendship groups. While acknowledging the Government's agenda that the principal function of college was to provide students with the opportunity to gain qualifications, the students themselves identified that friends were a significant feature in their decision to remain at college. Friends not only assisted the participants with their college studies, but also provided and alternative dimension which allowed them to enjoy the time they spent at college. The choice of friends was influenced by race, gender, and to a degree age, although the exact chemistry which produced this selection was not explored in this research.

6.9 Course Achievement Data

Most of the data techniques I have used for this research, focus groups, one-to-one interviews, observations and photo-records, fit within a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm. However, a significant feature of these students' experience is their academic success, as measured by course and exam achievement. National data on the academic success of Black males in FE is, at the current time, limited and there is far more information regarding achievement of students in secondary schools (see section *4.3 The Academic Location of Black Males in Secondary and Further Education Sectors*).

I will use this section to present local quantitative data of the academic achievement of the research participants and the overall achievement of Black students attending the first urban college. I obtained this data from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) who collate data from all colleges in the conurbation to show the academic success rates[10] of students by ethnicity and age. Because of the 'sensitive nature' of the data, this information is not readily available and colleges will not automatically release these figures. Although I could have requested achievement data from the second college using the Freedom of Information Act, I did not wish to risk souring relationships with Principals and staff with whom I may need to work at a later date. The data I have been able to obtain for the first urban college relates to three academic years, 2003-04 through to 2005-06. The last year of data includes the students who participated in the research. In addition to the LSC data I also obtained information on the specific achievement of the research participants from the college's exam office. My reason for including this information, is that it provides numerical evidence of the academic achievement of Black males at one of the research colleges. Moreover, it

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[10] Success Rate = % of Course Completers x % of Students Gaining Principal Enrolled Qualification

specifically locates the academic achievement of the research participants within a broader framework, by comparing their achievements to that of other groups studying in the college.

6.9.1 Student Success Rates over the Three Year Period 2003-06

The following tables show the student success rate by age and ethnicity. The first table presents data for 16-18 year olds; the second is for students aged 19 and over; and the third tale shows aggregated data of all Black students compared to white students. This data helps to provide a fuller and more complete picture of the students' experience and allows a comparison to be made across ethnic groups.

Table 6: Success Rates of 16-18 Year Old Students by Ethnicity over a Three Year Period for the First Urban College

Ethnicity	Academic Year					
	2003-04		2004-05		2005-06	
	No	Success Rate	No	Success Rate	No	Success Rate
Any Other	39	64 %	41	63%	38	89%
Bangladeshi	2	0%	12	75%	12	67%
Black African	31	45%	33	67%	51	75%
Black Caribbean	177	46%	171	64%	176	57%
Black Other	20	55%	24	33%	34	68%
Chinese	12	67%	7	86%	3	33%
Indian	86	42%	76	51%	84	63%
Mixed	127	9%	197	53%	251	70%
Other Asian	9	67%	5	80%	11	82%
Pakistani	120	53%	114	50%	83	47%
Unknown	178	65%	101	73%	28	64%
White	2578	61%	2425	69%	2285	74%
Total	3379		3206		3057	

Table 7: Success Rates of 19+ Year Old Students by Ethnicity Over a Three Year Period for the First Urban College

Ethnicity	Academic Year					
	2003-04		2004-05		2005-06	
	No	Success Rate	No	Success Rate	No	Success Rate
Any Other	227	48	256	58	198	75
Bangladeshi	9	56	21	76	15	47
Black African	122	69	103	66	116	66
Black Caribbean	272	60	250	65	252	67
Black Other	44	64	39	72	57	74
Chinese	80	44	51	63	65	69
Indian	272	58	199	63	172	78
Mixed	180	64	163	67	202	71
Other Asian	76	59	79	75	66	86
Pakistani	282	53	249	70	197	59
Unknown	2981	81	1544	81	774	82
White	15193	74	12367	79	9321	82
Total	19738		15321		11435	

Table 8: Aggregated Achievement of All Black Students Compared to White Students at First Urban College

Group	Academic Year					
	2003-04		2004-05		2005-06	
	Success Rate	Gap in Success Rates relative to White Peers	Success Rate	Gap in Success Rates relative to White Peers	Success Rate	Gap in Success Rates relative to White Peers
All 16-18 Black Groups	49	12	55	14	67	7
All 19+ Black Groups	64	10	68	11	69	13
All 16-18 White Groups	61	-	69	-	74	-
All 19+ White Groups	74	-	79	-	82	-

Source: LSC Student Success Rates Report 2006

The research participants are located in the Black African, Black Caribbean and Black Other categories for 2005-06. 23 of the research participants were aged 16-18 and the remaining

three students were over 19. Data for the other three students who took part in this research is not shown, as they attended the second suburban college.

6.9.2 Discussion of Student Success Rates Over the Three Year Period 2003-06

In the 16-18 age group the only Black group to consistently improve over the three year period were Black African students whose success rates increased from 45%, to 67% to 75%, as shown in Table 6. For the other two Black groups achievement followed no identifiable pattern. Table 7 shows for 19 plus age group both Black Caribbean and Black other students showed a consistent improvement, while the achievement of Black African students slightly declined. The students who participated in my research all achieved on the programmes for which they were enrolled, and if considered as an isolated group achieved 100% success rate. The achievement of these students is included in the overall success rate figure for 2005-06.

Only in one year, 2005-06, did any Black 16-18 year olds outperform their white counterparts, when Black African students achieved a success rate of 75%, compared to 74% for white students. For all other years, all other Black groups across the age ranges persistently performed worst than their white counterparts. However, if all three Black groups achievement scores are aggregated both 16-18 year olds and 19+ students show a consistent improvement in success rates over the three year period, but it must be remembered these figures have been enhanced by the consistently high success rates of Black African students and also include Black females, who consistently show higher achievement relative to their male peers. However, such an interpretation could, however, be deceptive, for if the achievement gap relative to white peers is examined, there has not been a similar consistent reduction in this gap. Moreover, the picture becomes even less clear, as white students have also shown improvements in success rates during this time.

It is significant that each one of the research participants passed the course they were studying in college. This needs to be remembered when reading the research findings, because as successful Black students, the research participants may have perceived and reported their experience of FE differently to that of their less successful Black colleagues. It is further possible that the academic success of the research participants is not wholly attributable to the 'FE experience' and the research participants may have arrived at college with positive work attitudes, which continued while at college and contributed to their overall

positive experience of college. It is not possible to say if these perceptions would have been the same if these students had been less successful in their studies.

In this section, I have provided data to indicate the relative academic achievement of Black students studying at the first urban college, in comparison to their white peers. The data here is not entirely clear, and a three year period is insufficient to conclusively determine whether Black males achieve better in FE compared to schools. However, what can be stated is while studying at FE, most Black groups appear to display a lower level of academic achievement relative to their white peers,. The usefulness of this data can also be challenged for although it provides some information on the overall success rates, it does not indicate at what level the students were studying.

6.10 Chapter Summary

I have used this chapter to present the collected research evidence, to answer the primary research question, 'what is the educational experience of Black males within the FE sector?' I have drawn extensively on the information generated through focus group discussions and individual interviews, supplemented with further information collected through observations and photo-records. Additionally I have also used numerical data to comment on the academic success rates of the research participants, and all other Black students in the first urban college. While not necessarily conclusive, this information contributes to developing a broader understanding of the research participants' experience of FE and so helps to answer the initial research question. This is an extensive chapter and raises a number of significant issues. For convenience these key issues are briefly summarised in the table 9 below. A fuller discussion of these key issues is provide in Chapter 8, *Reflections, Emergent Conclusions and Recommendations.*

Table 9: Summary of Research Findings

Main Themes – see *Table 5* and *sections 6.8* and *6.9*	Principal Data Sources	Key Points Related to Theme
Institutional Culture of FE Colleges	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	The institutional culture of FE colleges appeared to be more suited to the needs of Black males and was perceived to be both different and better by the research participants.

College Curriculum	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	Most of the research participants preferred the curriculum available at college, although acknowledged further developments were needed.
Support Mechanisms	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	Support mechanisms were fundamental to student achievement and the research participants made extensive use of support provided by college staff, peers and family.
Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	Most participants experienced positive supportive relationships with college staff, who were perceived as trying to be fair in their exchanges with students.
Personal Motivation to Succeed	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	Black students who succeed in education make a positive choice to use their own agency to enable them to achieve academic success.
The Difference Between FE and School	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	Many research participants found schools to be hostile places and unsupportive of them and their learning, reporting unfair discrimination. Colleges while not ideal appeared to make a positive effort to be fair and equitable.
Racism in Schools, FE Colleges and Wider Society	Focus Groups Individual Interviews Observations	Racism was perceived as being endemic in all parts of society and made academic and other forms of success harder to achieve.
The Significance of Friendship Groups	Photo-Records Observations	Friendship, and particularly the friendship of other Black males, was a significant feature in helping to promote academic success while at college.
Course Acheivement	LSC Student Success Rates Course achievement Data from First Urban College	Most Black students appear to achieve at lower levels relative to their white peers.

It would be inaccurate to state this research provides a final and definitive answer to the research question, but it does reveal a number of interesting themes regarding the participants' experience while at FE. Although neither I, nor the research participants, could have known or predicted that each one of the participants would go on to successfully complete their programmes, this positive orientation may have been significant in forming the participants' perceptions of FE. However, it also important to note that over a third of the

research participants (10 in total) had experienced unsuccessful (and sometimes bruising) school careers, including permanent exclusion, and so had been obliged to begin their FE studies at level 1. This persistence and eventual success could have been indicative of positive personality traits that helped to make their experience of FE both enjoyable and successful. In doing so the participants used their agency to challenge to Bourdieu's notion of habitus and more readily demonstrated that there can be:

> *gray areas where uncertainties about life chances are internalised that do not fit the fundamentally dichotomous boundaries that Bourdieu's concept of habitus presupposes.*
> Swartz, 1997, p107

Furthermore, in trying to thwart a potentially bleak pre-determined destiny the participants showed that there are circumstances:

> *under which aspirations fail to synchronise with expectations and expectations with opportunities, despite overwhelming evidence.*
> Swartz, 1997, p111

Although a Bourdieusian perspective would indicate limited prospects for certain groups, some individuals will attempt to write their own brighter futures through increasing their personal cultural capital. In this way the participants can be seen to be similar to the ambitious middle classes who 'engaged in an extensive, systematic programme of generating cultural capital for their children' (Reay, 1998, p70). However, a significant difference here is the participants who took part in my research needed to complete this process for themselves and could not rely on family, parents or others securing such advantages for them. And, even after making such efforts they could not necessarily be assured that their attempts would produce positive benefits.

Further my research suggests that presentation of Black males in FE, appears to be 'just being how you are', their true and congruent selves. The consequence of this difference in perception of presentation is Black males, released from the imposition of damaging stereotypes prevalent in the secondary sector, are able to use the FE sector to re-enter education and access mainstream opportunities from which they have been previously

excluded, and to a degree the four coping strategies of unconditional conformity, invisibility, overt challenge and subtle challenge (discussed previously in section *4.5 Black Students Presentation of Self in Secondary and FE Sectors*) are at odds with the actual presentation evidenced in my research, where Black students were able to maintain their racial identity and successfully navigate the education system (see section *6.3 Support Mechanisms Available to Students while at College*).

A final point is, although my research has demonstrated a generally positive experience of FE with many Black males enjoying college and achieving relevant qualifications, it is important to note that these findings 'may not hold in all cases' nor can I 'specify definitively when the formulations will or will not hold' (Stiles, 1993, p598). It would be reckless to argue these research findings represent a universal reality of life for Black males in FE, however, the research does contribute to a 'fuzzy generalisation' (Bassey, 2003, p52) of these students' experience, suggesting that as well as being evident in the two colleges where I completed my research, such situations 'may also happen elsewhere' (ibid). Unfortunately, the small scale nature of my research means that I am unable to give 'any measure of (the) probability' (ibid, p46) of this happening in other colleges. Although illuminative, it is possible that my findings may only apply to the particular circumstances of the two colleges where I completed the research at the particular time the research was undertaken. This research provides part of a much larger picture regarding study in FE, and does not and cannot claim to comprehensively answer the original question. Only through completing more research and collecting and collating further 'fuzzy generalisations', would it be possible to develop a broader theory of life in FE for Black males.

CHAPTER SEVEN: KNOWLEDGE, VALIDITY AND REPRESENTION

One of the jobs of a researcher in the presentation of a thesis is to make the epistemological basis of the research apparent. However, 'if every research thesis had to elaborate its ontological and epistemological background, the wheel would truly be endlessly reinvented' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, p33), for it is likely there will be many similarities between, and significant repetition in, the arguments used. And yet, not to provide this information would hinder the reading of the thesis by creating too many unexplained assumptions, rendering any knowledge claims which might be subsequently made, questionable. I will use this chapter to address how this fundamental feature relates to my research and, while avoiding repeating well-worn arguments, provide such information that assists the reader in locating my research within an epistemological framework. I have chosen to locate this chapter at this point, after the methodology chapter and my research findings, as the discussion of epistemology is easier to access and clearer having previously disclosed the findings and context of the research.

Epistemology necessarily raises further questions of validity and representations of reality. Research needs to provide a credible and authentic account of the situation or phenomenon that has been researched, if claims of a contribution to knowledge are to be made which can later be accepted by the wider research community. I will also use this chapter to describe the validity measures relevant to my inquiry and which I applied to ensure the research I completed was rigorous, robust and valid. In the final section I will discuss how I worked to ensure that my account and interpretations of the participants' realities accurately represented the participants themselves, the views they expressed and their everyday experiences within two FE colleges. In this way I was able to build up an authentic picture of the lives of these particular Black males in their different colleges and so make a contribution to the growing and evolving knowledge of the experiences of Black male students in the UK education system.

7.1 The Epistemological Framework

Before there can be knowledge there must be a knower, who accepts the function of identifying what can be known, for 'there can be no knowledge without a knower' (Kincheloe, 1991, p26). This is an important feature to appreciate when discussing the nature of knowledge, for accepting there must first be a knower, opens up the possibility that knowledge, at least to a degree, *could* be influenced by the 'mind of the knower' (ibid). Thus

knowledge can be seen as 'a constructed dynamic interaction of men and women organised and shaped by race, class and gender' (ibid). This is significant, for while it can be argued that all knowledge is a production of the dominant paradigms and hegemonies of the time, the fact that knowledge *can* be influenced by the knower, underlines the interpreted, fluid, transient and unstable nature of knowledge itself, where today's fact can become tomorrow's fiction, and yesterday's superstition may yet become today's certainty. When faced with such an uncertain and changing landscape defining what knowledge is becomes an even more difficult and problematic challenge.

Vattimo suggests epistemology may be defined as 'the construction of a body of rigorous knowledge and the solution of problems in light of paradigms that lay down rules for the verification of propositions' (2005, p170). This definition, which appears to be heavily influenced by the logical scientific-positivist tradition, is useful in that it indicates that knowledge claims need to be sufficiently robust to withstand question and challenge. However, although certain paradigms and rules may be accepted as fixed features within the scientific research community, this is not the case in the social science and education research community, which exhibits a much greater fluidity. Furthermore, this definition does not fully accommodate knowledge which is felt and developed through our lived experience.

Pring offers an alternative view and suggests that knowledge, rather than being solely focussed on problem solving, is information 'accumulated through enquiry, criticism, argument and counter argument' (2004, p80). This description extends Vattimo's argument as it has the capacity to not only solve problems, but also to accommodate knowledge which is developed through our everyday interactions. Whether such information is then widely accepted then 'depends on a publically agreed framework of justification, refutation and verification' (ibid, p79). However the type of verification required for knowledge to be accepted, depends on the type of knowledge being claimed, for knowledge can be defined in many ways. One typology, developed by Scheler in the 1920s, suggested there are 'seven forms of knowledge' (Jarvis and Parker, 2005, p118), which he classified as:

1. *myth and legend – undifferentiated, primitive forms of knowledge based in religion, nature and so on;*
2. *knowledge based on natural language – everyday knowledge;*
3. *religious knowledge – more formulated dogma and so on;*
4. *mystical knowledge*

5. *philosophical – metaphysical knowledge;*

6. *mathematical knowledge – mathematics and the natural sciences;*

7. *technical knowledge.*

ibid

This is a useful typology, as it identifies there can be many different types of knowing, and further implies there can be different values accorded to different forms of knowledge by describing 'myth and legend' as a 'primitive' kind of knowledge. However, if all types of knowing are valid and acceptable, how can we know which sort of knowledge to trust? It would be comforting if there was a single test which could be universally applied to all situations which indicated 'true knowledge'. However, no such test exists and instead we have come to rely on supporting information collected in differing ways to determine the value of knowledge, for it is the quality of this other evidence which confers validity on research. In this way the endorsement of an elder may be sufficient for the acceptance of a legend, while the acceptance of religious knowledge could be based on miracles, which would differ again from the sort of quantifiable measureable evidence needed within the scientific community. And yet *all* are of these can claim to be 'evidence' and *all* may be adequate for the acceptance of knowledge. The choice between these forms of evidence and knowledge is influenced by our personal views so that in the end:

> *the choice between rival paradigms is not ultimately made by proving that one paradigm is logically superior to another or that it provides a more truthful explanation of the world. Rather the choice is made on the basis of a belief, sufficiently widely held within the community, that one paradigm will provide a better way of working and clear up more anomalies than any other.*

> Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p178

In the final analysis then, rather than having a precise means 'of telling truth from falsehood' (Fernandez-Armesto, 1998, p83), knowledge becomes that which we are willing to and are prepared to accept as knowledge, rather than an absolute measure.

Although something may be identified as knowledge, this does not imply that all forms of knowledge are necessarily equally valued and different types of knowledge are pitched against each other in an ongoing contest for primacy. Positivism, associated with scientific enquiry, seeks to persuade us that knowledge is 'static and certain' (Kincheloe, 1991, p28)

occupying, 'no space in the known world; operating outside of history, the knower knows the world of education and its students, teachers and leaders objectively' (ibid, p27). Thus positivism asserts knowledge is an objective truth which 'exists independently of knowers' (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p174) and that the knower can adopt a neutral '"Gods-eye-view", a disembodied and disembedded timeless perspective that can know the world by transcending it' (ibid, p210), effectively ignoring the issue that 'what we call information always involves an act of human judgement' (Kincheloe, 1991, p122) and that 'knowledge gets its meaning from the value systems' and 'political position of the knowers', (Griffiths, 1998, p46).

To accept that knowledge is an objective, impersonal absolute is to deny a fundamental reality of the research process discussed earlier, in that knowers, through the research process will *always* have been intimately involved with the construction of knowledge. The researcher, as an integral part of the research, will be making decisions and choosing how the study should be conducted throughout the inquiry. Although the researcher may seek to distance themselves from the inquiry to ensure greater objectivity, they cannot. Because science supplies evidence which can be measured it claims 'to provide objective knowledge, where "objective" refers to independence from the particular observer who happened to produce it' (Griffiths, 1998, p46). Thus scientific knowledge positions itself as a more reliable source of knowledge as it provides quantifiable evidence which can be trusted with confidence, and as a result of this, can be considered superior to other forms of knowledge. Consequently there has been an impetus to import scientific method 'in the human sciences' (ibid, 1998, p46). While there may be some comfort in the assured certainty offered by scientific positivism, once we accept the notion of a knower, whether science and logical positivism is capable of providing absolute truths becomes contestable.

 Furthermore, social research is significantly different from scientific research because 'the objects of social research, humans, possess a special complexity which sets them apart from other objects of study' and thus prohibits 'the possibility of research neatness desired by the physical scientist' (Kincheloe, 1991, p71). Griffiths further emphasises this difference when she explains that:

> *unlike the objects of research in the physical sciences – crystals, electrons, atoms, fluids, electromagnetic fields - human beings are not simply passive subjects of research. All human beings react to situations, including the situations of being*

researchers or research subjects...To put this another way, human beings construct
meanings for the events in which they participate.

1998, p36

The social researcher does not simply explore, investigate and report findings, but in the process of completing research engages with the participants and becomes a co-collaborator in the construction of knowledge. Whereas science may seek to develop rules or models which help to predict future events the purpose of social research is 'interpretation, meaning and illumination' (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p181) and the building of 'knowledge and understanding' (Altheide and Johnson, 1994, p487), not the 'generalisation, prediction and control'(Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p181) required by investigations in natural sciences. Because social research seeks to build a picture of events and circumstances it is able to accept multiple realities and acknowledge 'what is true for you, is not necessarily true for me' (Fernandez-Armesto, 1998, p204). In this way social research is able to accommodate 'many diverse bodies of knowledge' (Kincheloe, 1991, p68) and acknowledge differing explanations to situations.

Whereas scientific research appears to present a confident and secure definition of knowledge, 'no consensus has been reached on a new definition of social knowledge' (Kincheloe, 1991, p67). Instead social science continues to develop and accept new forms of knowledge or 'to put the point simply, what we designate as knowledge is fickle, subject to change given our context and interest' (Kincheloe, 1991, p68). Within social research it has become a working reality that knowledge is only able to 'hold authority according to the social pressures that give legitimacy rather than according to their 'scientific' truth' (Bartlett and Burton, 2007, p81). Knowledge in social science is thus transformed from an immutable monolith and is not certain, rather it is illuminative for a particular context, at a particular time, in a particular set of circumstances.

Phenomenology, which is concerned with exploring the experiences and lives of individuals and groups, has further helped to challenge conceptions of knowledge and the views of the scientific community, by 'invite(ing) us to question what counts as knowledge and truth' (Pring, 2004, p112) and to produce new constructions of knowledge. In contrast to the approach of scientific research, my research does not claim to provide certain truth, rather it offers 'a temporary perspective on a particular segment of the educational world'(Kincheloe, 1991, p121) which assists in 'expand(ing) our consciousness and appreciation' (ibid, p28) of

the experiences of the research participants (a further discussion on phenomenology is provided in section *5.2.1 The Research Question and Phenomenology*).

A consequence of abandoning 'the quest for certainty is untidy diversity' (ibid, p115) and we are forced to accept that 'the world itself (especially the social and educational world) is not all that neat'(ibid). As a consequence of this untidiness, any conclusions we might draw can:

> *never be more than tentative generalisations always subject to revision because of their recognition of continuous contextual change and the divergence of differing teaching situations,*

> ibid, p81.

Furthermore:

> *no matter how full our interpretations, the knowledge that we as researchers can have...will never be complete (because) human actions are interpretable only within the hermeneutic circle, hence knowledge is indeterminate*

> Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p183.

Although the uncertainties of social research could be viewed as disheartening, and 'trapped between fundamentalists, who believe they have found truth, and relativists, who refuse to pin it down, the bewildered majority in between continue to hope there is a truth worth looking for' (Fernandez-Armesto, 1998, p3), social research provides opportunities that are not so readily available in scientific research. While any knowledge claims produced by social research will still be subject to a recognised legitimation process before they can be widely accepted, the social researcher is enabled to connect the 'knower and known, purpose and technique by utilizing the human as instrument'(Kincheloe, 1991, p31), and draw upon their personal 'tacit knowledge (to help them) to make sense of social and educational situations' (ibid, p29). Social research encourages us to:

> *extend knowing to a higher level through (our) capacity to grasp the realm of the felt, the emotional, the unconscious. Those unexamined usages, those unintended meanings which reveal insights that open windows into the significance of experience, are the type of understandings that only humans are capable of grasping.*

> ibid

By recognising our emotions as 'powerful knowing mechanisms (we can) extend our ability to make sense of the universe' (ibid, p41). In this way we are able to:

> *synthesise information, generate interpretations, and revise and sophisticate those interpretations at the site the inquiry takes place. In the process the human as a research instrument can explore the unusual, the idiosyncratic situation ... (and develop) a new level of understanding.*

> ibid, p30

Within the context of my research, by using my ability to understand nuance, language, action and interactions, and by appreciating my personal involvement with the research process I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the participants' lives and move beyond 'the limitations of traditional definitions of research (to) explore the relationships between the knower and the known' (ibid, p47). As a researcher I acknowledge that I too am part of the research, part of the 'web-like configuration of interacting forces (which) ... no one can totally escape' (ibid, p119) and that my research findings can only reflect that which I perceive from the 'limited vantage point' (ibid) I occupy. I have accepted the challenge of linking myself as a researcher to the area of inquiry and I provide a full explanation of my relation to the research question, the research participants and the research process in Chapter 2, *Locating Myself as a Researcher,* to enable the reader to more fully understand how my personal orientations influenced the research design and how I conducted the study. By working within these boundaries I have used my position and personal knowledge to help build an alternative construction of knowledge and to present a different vision of the Black male experience of education in the FE sector.

Knowledge is not fixed and 'always arises from what is already known ... and is therefore circular, iterative (and) spiral rather than linear and cumulative as portrayed in positivist/empiricist epistemology' (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p182). However, knowledge production is not a spontaneous phenomenon and as a researcher I am able to 'exercise power in having the world seen in a particular way and having that way of seeing accepted both inside and outside the community' (ibid, p179). Because FE has traditionally valued '"lived experience" as a subject and field of research' (ibid, p171), I was able to utilise my personal position within FE colleges to explore the lives of the research participants and to present a different perspective of life in FE. In firmly locating my research in a

phenomenological framework I jettisoned the search for an unchanging, static knowledge and instead accepted Kincheloe's position that:

> *if we can learn anything from science it is our ideas and the world change and they will continue to change in the coming years. The chance of arriving at some juncture in human history where research will become unnecessary because we understand the nature of reality is slim. There are no social and educational laws and thus no certainty – and we should get used to it.*
>
> 1991, p114

The knowledge of social research is not fixed at some point in time, never to vary, but is evolutionary and constantly changing.

7.2 Achieving Validity

Cohen, Manion and Morrison state 'validity is an important key to effective research. If a piece of research is invalid, then it is worthless. Validity is thus a requirement for both quantitative and qualitative/naturalistic research' (2000, p105). Demonstrating validity is a means of showing that sufficiently robust proofs have been provided for the research to be accepted as trustworthy, and the credibility of any inquiry rests upon this validity for 'claims cannot stand alone in research contexts without some form of corroborating evidence' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, p103). I will use this section to discuss those standards of validity expected of qualitative, naturalistic inquiry, for it be accepted as serious, scholarly research and which applied to my inquiry.

Validity, although a widely used term within educational research has a variety of meanings. This is because the term is constantly evolving and changing to reflect the prevailing views of the time. As well as being a term which is in everyday use, validity is also used in other areas of research, for example statistics and psychology, where it has a different meaning. Sometimes these different meanings can be superimposed on each other, utilising different aspects of the term from each field of study so that the intended meaning becomes confused and unclear. The definition of validity I will be using is provided by Denscombe who states the critical issue concerning validity is 'whether or not the data reflect the truth, reflect reality and cover crucial matters' (2003, p301). Using this definition, validity, is thus primarily concerned with providing a faithful account of reality. These content and representation issues inevitably overlap with methodological and, to a degree, ethical issues which are discussed in detail in

Chapter 5, *Research Methodology*. I will not repeat those arguments here; rather I will use this section to describe how validity relates to my inquiry and what measures should be used in assessing the study's rigour.

It is important that the principles which determine validity are appropriate to an inquiry's epistemological location and 'validity in different research traditions (needs to remain) faithful to those traditions' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p106). Thus, the criteria that may be relevant for assessing a qualitative study will contrast to those which are appropriate to a quantitative study, as these two research approaches have inherent, critical differences. 'Because the idea of validity originated in quantitative research' (Silverman, 2004, p232), initially measures to assess the 'methodological adequacy and validity were formulated and essentially "owned" by positivism' (Altheide and Johnson, 1994, p487) with indicators such as neutrality, being context-free, predictability based on 'universal laws' (ibid), and whether 'standardised, objective comparisons (could) be made' (Punch, 2005, p238) being favoured. Further the positivist position was 'the stability of methods and findings (were) an indicator of "validity" or accuracy and truthfulness of the findings' (Altheide and Johnson, 1994, p487). Although such measures may be well suited to scientific research, they are not necessarily appropriate to educational and social research, and while *all research* must be able to demonstrate validity, it is important to resist the pressure of assuming that *all measures* are suitable for every type of research. In particular, because of the dominating influence of scientific inquiry, 'qualitative researchers need to be cautious not to be working within the agenda of the positivists' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p106) by superimposing unsuitable measures on their work, which may suggest their work lacked credibility.

In contrast to the merit accorded to measurement, control and predictability characteristic of quantitative research, the principles of naturalistic research are concerned that investigations should be 'socially situated, and socially and culturally saturated, (where) the natural setting is the principal source of data (and provide) contextboundness and "thick description" ' (ibid). Social research is less concerned with providing 'versions of "objectivity"' (Silverman, 2004, p220) and is more concerned with building an understanding of 'people and their behaviour (within) a social context' (Punch, 2009, p9) by 'getting the insider's perspective' of events (Punch, 2005, p238).

My research, which was conducted over a period of 15 months within two different FE colleges, adheres to these standards expected of naturalistic inquiry, and was concerned with developing an illuminative account of the perceptions of life in FE colleges for Black males. Although 'natural' is a problematic term, and any constructed environment such as a college, school or business could only ever be artificial, as my inquiry was a study of how Black males experienced the *FE environment*, it can be accepted as a 'natural' setting in that colleges *are* an FE environment and provide an opportunity for many learners to continue their studies beyond statutory education. (For a more detailed description of FE, see Chapter 3, *Locating the Context of the Study*). The extended period of study enabled me to become immersed in the inquiry and allowed sufficient data to be collected to achieve saturation so that no further key themes emerged. While there could be challenges on the range and number of FE colleges covered in the study in terms of representation for wider generalisation to be possible, saturation was achieved for the two study colleges and for the students who participated in the study. Furthermore, the data techniques employed (observation, focus groups and individual interviews) allowed in-situ naturalistic data to be collected and supported gaining an insider's perspective of college life for the research participants. A full description of how I developed and tested the research instruments used, and how I worked to collect the data for this study is provided in Chapter 5, *Research Methodology*.

While there is no agreed single framework available for assessing the validity of qualitative studies and 'reconfigurations of validity leave researchers with multiple, sometimes conflicting, mandates for what constitutes rigorous research' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p178), it is important that qualitative researchers employ some measures for assessing their work. As naturalistic inquiry takes a different focus to the objectivity seen as critical in scientific research, 'conventional criteria (are) inappropriate to the naturalistic paradigm' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p294). Consequently, Lincoln and Guba offer an alternative framework for assessing the validity of studies, arguing '"credibility", "transferability", "dependability" and "confirmability" are the naturalist's equivalents of "internal validity" , "external validity", "reliability" and "objectivity" ' (ibid, p300) favoured by positivists. These terms, although not direct equivalents of the scientific descriptors, have greater relevance for the phenomenological researcher, as they reflect the uncertain terrain of qualitative research and the need for all qualitative inquirers to remain alert to the subjectivity and transitory nature of their work, while retaining the rigour essential of all inquiry.

Hammersley, building on the work of Lincoln and Guba, has expanded these criteria and suggests a list of seven criteria appropriate to qualitative investigations. These are:

1. *the degree to which generic/formal theory is produced;*

2. *the degree of development of the theory;*

3. *the novelty of the claim made;*

4. *the consistency of the claims with empirical observations, and the inclusion of representative examples of the latter in the report;*

5. *the credibility of the account to readers and/or to those studied;*

6. *the extent to which the findings are transferable to other settings;*

7. *the reflexivity of the account; the degree to which the effects on the findings of the researcher and of the research strategies employed are assessed and/or the amount of information about the research process that is provided to the readers.*

    1992, p64

However, even in proposing these criteria, Hammersley questions their relevance asking rhetorically if they should be applied to all research and answering 'there is no reason why they should' (ibid). Indeed he canvasses that such measures should be modified to reflect 'the intended product of the research' (ibid), thus returning the responsibility for selecting the most relevant criteria back to the researcher, and to a degree, to those who may at some later stage read the research.

The criteria themselves also need careful consideration. While there may be an ethical necessity to check the accuracy of records with research participants, this should not be confused with data interpretation, which is the role of the researcher. Data checks need to ensure that the information collected represents an accurate record of events, but it is the researcher's responsibility to synthesise this data with other existing information and to interpret these findings for a broader audience. Although it would be arrogant for any researcher to presume that they understood an individual's reality better than that individual themselves, the researcher's distanced and privileged position provides access to other information and perspectives which can then be used to provide a broader picture of events and circumstances. Thus, the most appropriate criteria for assessing the validity of qualitative research in general and my inquiry in particular, are not unequivocally defined. Indeed,

applying Hammersley's suggestion it appears that as a researcher, I am responsible for identifying and choosing the criteria I believe are most relevant, and appealing to the reader to accept my suggested framework.

Although not exclusively concerned with the technical construction of validity, more recently, in an effort to promote consistency in standards and to provide some clarity on what constitutes robust research, the Higher Education Funding Council has proposed:

> *three quality criteria which were believed to be applicable to the full range of research, not just in education, but across the board. These were the criteria of rigour, originality and significance.*

> Bridges, 2009, p499

As these criteria were applicable to the entire Higher Education sector, each area was then required to provide a detail interpretation of the criteria, demonstrating how they would be applied within their individual discipline. In recognising the heterogeneity of the sector, The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) provided amplification designed to satisfy a broad range of research approaches from traditional quantitative methodologies to progressive creative approaches. This challenge was met by interpreting the three criteria in the following way:

> *Originality – in analyses and/or syntheses of the field, or in the development of innovative designs, methods and methodologies, analytical models or theories and concepts.*

> *Significance –the potential to have considerable significance by breaking new theoretical or methodological ground, providing new social science knowledge or tackling important practical, current problems and providing trustworthy results in some field of education.*

> *Rigour – includes traditional qualities such as reliability and validity, and also qualities such as integrity, consistency of argument and consideration of ethical issues.*

> Adapted from Higher Education Funding Councils, 2006, p32-33, cited in Bridges, 2009, p499

The strength of these three broad criteria, are their breadth and flexibility which facilitates them being applied to all educational research projects. They are respectful of tradition, and simultaneously recognise the significant changes in the area to provide a mechanism which accommodates new approaches to research. And yet this strength remains the most significant weakness of these criteria, for they still fail to provide an absolute affirmation of the standards needed for research to be accepted as legitimate within the wider community, and there is still room for considerable interpretation. Although phenomenological researchers can have some confidence that their research could be accommodated using these standards and has a place within the field, there is still no certainty in what can be counted as rigorous research, and thus no firm definition of what may be considered valid within the field. In this regard, the criteria have not clarified the debate on what constitutes valid research, and to a degree, have purely synthesised existing definitions to produce a research based amalgam which accommodates all previous attempts to define validity. In this instance, in seeking a benchmark by which to determine validity of my study, I have chosen to revert to the earlier definition provided by Denscombe, and to conceptualise validity as being a measure of accuracy and truthfulness of the phenomena under consideration, and it is these two measures I have applied to my research.

Quantitative scientific research requires that 'results can be generalised to the wider population, cases or situations' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000, p109). This is a challenging area for qualitative researchers, for an underlying tenet of qualitative research is its specificity and spatio-temporal location and, as a result of its contextboundness, it can only capture, record and report events as they relate to a particular environment, situation and time. However, qualitative researchers are not necessarily duty bound in the same way as scientific researchers to provide data which can be applied to other contexts and may choose to use other criteria to assess the value of their work. Indeed, 'some qualitative researchers would claim generalisability should not be considered a standard against which the credibility of a research study should be assessed' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p178). Further, some researchers (for example Kirk and Miller, 1986; Berg, 1989) even claim that generalisability is 'unimportant, unachievable, or both' (Schofield, 2007, p182). Rather qualitative researchers are responsible for providing 'a clear, detailed and in-depth description so that others can decide the extent to which findings from one piece of research are generalisable to another situation' (Cohen Manion, and Morrison, 2000, p109). The onus is thus not on the researcher to demonstrate that results can be generalised, rather once the researcher has provided a detailed,

rich description of the research, the readers are left to decide whether or not they believe the findings would have relevance to other environments.

However, the situation regarding generalisation remains ambiguous and qualitative studies can build up over time 'in a particular topic area ... (and) as a body of common trends and insights emerges, it may then be possible to generalise such observations to other settings, situations and cases'(Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p178). Indeed, 'although qualitative researchers have traditionally paid scant attention to the issues of attaining generalisability in research, sometimes even disdaining such a goal, this situation has changed'(Schofield, 1993, p220), and in more recent times they have become more interested in how their work may have 'implications for the understanding of other situations' (ibid, p221), seeking to include measures which would promote greater confidence in applying their work to other environments. Nevertheless, it remains a choice for the reader to decide if a study 'provide(s) a sufficient description of the context'(Punch, 2005, p254) for them to determine whether a particular inquiry may have a relevance to their area of interest.

Even accepting Denscombe's definition validity cannot be solely presented as a process of checking the veracity of findings, it also necessitates there is an 'internal logic and consistency of the research' (Punch, 2009, p 315). This question relates back to the research design and research techniques used. In planning a research programme, there needs to be an overall coherence to the research process from initiation, through to implementation. The research aims, and agenda must be clearly declared and the intended eventual outcomes made known, from the very beginning of the research. Consistent with a social justice agenda, and with Griffiths' assertion that the primary purpose of research, is to promote 'justice, fairness and equity in education' (1998, p3) I was committed to this research helping to bring about change for Black males studying in FE and to make a difference to existing systems by identifying how this marginalised group experienced the system and by disseminating these findings to the academic community and beyond.

Further, validity requires that 'the explanation of a particular event ... can actually be sustained by the data ... (and) the findings faithfully represent and reflect the reality that has been studied' (Cohen Manion, and Morrison, 2000, p107). This necessitates sufficient data of a relevant nature being collected, while the last two features refer to the accuracy and reliability of the data and questions the way in which the research has been conducted. Much educational research is concerned with 'humans enquiring about other humans' (Walsh, 1999, p37) and

because research in education is completed by people, who, as a feature of their existence hold views, values and opinions it 'is constitutively value-engaged in a way natural science is not' (ibid, p51).

As a direct consequence of such value driven positions, 'the views and aspects of behaviour (in participant observation studies) or the views and experiences (in qualitative interviews) focused upon will be determined by what the researcher considers to be significant and worthy of study' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p177), although in the initial stages of a study many qualitative researchers may consider 'everything to have potential importance' (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p240). While the selection of 'critical instances from the data' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, p104) may be useful in helping to produce a nuanced understanding of an area, equally allegations, of presenting an untruthful or 'distorted picture of the situation researched' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p177) could be made. In addition, 'there may be interviewer effects in the data as a result of the presence or style of a particular interviewer' (Punch, 2005, p253) or participants 'may consciously or unconsciously alter the way they behave or modify what they say if they are aware they are being researched' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006, p176). The researcher needs to remain mindful of these possible difficulties and the potential affect they may produce on the accuracy of the data collected.

Data accuracy may be further threatened if the researcher forgets the purpose and focus of the inquiry and develops 'too close an identification' (ibid, p177) with the research participants, and no longer sees themselves as a researcher, but as one of the group. If left unaddressed these potentially serious weaknesses are 'likely to invalidate the data' (ibid, p176) and threaten the credibility of an inquiry. To meet these challenges naturalist inquirers have developed 'certain operational techniques' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p219) to check the robustness of their data – 'chief among these are prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing ... and member checking to establish credibility' (ibid).

Triangulation is 'comparing different kinds of data (eg quantitative and qualitative) and different methods (eg observations and interviews)' (Silverman, 2004, p233) as a means of checking the consistency of the data collected. Such checking is needed in research as different data collection techniques 'contain their own set of assumptions about the nature of the social world' (Denscombe, 2006, p132), and consequently each data collection technique will produce a different perspective of the world, with no single perspective being able to provide a complete

version of truth. The advantage of using a multi-layered approach, which utilises a range of perspectives, is it provides an opportunity to check data 'by using several points of reference' (Bartlett and Burton, 2007, p46) and thus 'improve(s) the quality of the research' (Denscombe, 2006, p132). Although it would be inaccurate to consider triangulation as an infallible truth-compass, 'the multi-method approach allows findings to be corroborated or questioned by comparing data' (ibid, p133) and so gives a greater degree of confidence in the research findings. To promote accuracy and to develop a better understanding of the research participants' realities I used multiple methods of data collection for my inquiry, utilising focus groups, individual interviews, observation and numerical data. This allowed me to build up a detailed picture of the participants' daily lives, and to check for consistency of information by comparing the findings of the different methods. A full discussion of the research findings and the way in which the data collection instruments were developed is provided in Chapters *6, Research Findings*, and *5 Research Methodology*.

Member Checking, where 'the developing products of the research (are taken) back to the people studied for confirmation, validation and verification' (Punch, 2009, p316), is a further tool used to determine validity in qualitative studies. Although this process has difficulties as participants may choose to present a particular version of events which may not accord with either the researcher's recollection or information provided by other participants, the researcher has an ethical and it is a professional responsibility to return to the field and seek the participants' views on the research findings – for if research is about producing change for a social good, to exclude the research participants would be to adopt an authority position and would renege on the ethical charge of 'nothing about us, without us'. By returning to the field to check my emergent findings I was able to give the research participants an opportunity to confirm or challenge my interpretations and an opportunity to add any additional information they wished to (a full discussion of how I achieved this and the validation meeting I held with the participants is provided in section *5.3.1 Ethical Issues*).

McNiff and Whitehead suggest that the data checking process can be extended beyond participant checking to include self-validation, colleagues' and critical friends' validation and academic validation (2002). These are useful additions to the validation process, as they add a further perspective from which to consider the data. By completing a questioning, reflexive self evaluation of research, the researcher is obliged to ask challenging questions of their own methodology and findings and, by seeking the views of others, the robustness of the research is

further tested. As small scale inquiries are often completed in isolation away from the mainstream academic community, little guidance is accessed from one of the main intended audiences. In referring the work to the academic community for feedback, the researcher can gain valuable feedback on their work and can know if it is acceptable to the wider community. By presenting my emergent findings at conference (BERA, 2007 and 2008) and through internal seminars I have been able to benefit from feedback from the academic community, and to wrestle with questions such as 'what does it mean to act white?'; 'what is the difference between asserting your ethnic identity and being education resistant?' and 'how do I as a white person demonstrate cultural congruence with Black youth?' Further, this vehicle has allowed me to begin to distribute my findings to those who, as a consequence of their employment, can consider making changes to their practice and so helped achieve my initial aim of wishing to make a difference in the lives of Black males while studying at FE and bringing about change to educational practices.

Ensuring research findings are properly validated is an important function of carrying out a small scale research project. It is the means by which wider communities, academic and otherwise, can determine both if the research provides new knowledge or has relevance to their particular area of interest. Although the measures used to assess the validity of qualitative studies often differ from those used for quantitative inquiries, there is still a requirement that the researcher shows how they have tried to confirm the validity of their findings. Without such measures, the reader is being asked to accept the inquiry as a matter of trust or goodwill. While this may be adequate in other environments, it is not acceptable within the research community and researchers need to demonstrate the robustness of their work before their research findings can be accepted. I have used this section to identify the validity standards that were most applicable to my inquiry and described how they related to my study. This section has inevitably overlapped with issues discussed elsewhere in this thesis, and where appropriate, I have provided signposts to other relevant sections.

7.3 Representing the Research Participants

Representing Black males presents a challenging conundrum on a number of different levels. In the first instance, the question of who can be considered to be a Black male needs to be addressed, for 'many disparate peoples of the African diaspora might be interpellated as Blacks' (Reid-Pharr, 1996, p90) and 'racial identities can never be gathered up in one place

as a final cultural property' (McCarthy and Crichlow. 1993, pxiii). In addition to the different groups of people who may be considered Black, different interpretations of the term also exist, dependent on where the term is used globally. In Jamaica, where many people could be described as Black, it has the literal meaning of skin shade and is used to differentiate between individuals within the population, whereas in England it is often used to describe all people of colour with a common African or Caribbean ancestry. Black is thus being used in at least two different ways – as an indicator of shared cultural heritage and also a way of distinguishing between people, who may share some common features. This difference in interpretation serves to emphasise that ethnicity and race are not fixed, stable attributes, 'what it means, how it is used, by whom, how it is mobilised as a social discourse, its role in educational and more general policy, all of this is contingent and historical' (Apple, 1996, p137).

In the absence of a common agreed understanding of the term and to prevent any potential confusion, for this study I have produced an alternative definition of the term Black. My definition reflects the issue of being a minority ethnic group in the UK, and rather than solely accepting an external categorisation based on visibility, also incorporates personal identity construction and preferred cultural alignment. In this study I have used Black to describe individuals who would usually be identified as Black by most people, and who positively chose to identify themselves with the wider Black community. I provide a full description of my interpretation of this term in section *4.1.1. Black*.

The issue of maleness also requires some attention. Popular culture, supported by the media portrays a particular image of Black masculinity, so that rapper Ice Cube proclaims that 'true niggas ain't gay' (O'Shea Jackson, 1991) and it has become necessary for 'gay and lesbian African Americans who want to prove they are "really" Black to renounce their sexuality' (Thomas, 1996, p61). Being a man, and being a Black man, has thus become synonymous with 'homophobia and virulent masculinism' (ibid), prepared to accept 'a sexually defined masculine ideal rooted in physical and sexual possession of women' (hooks, 1992, p94) which affirms 'patriarchy and women-hating' (hooks, 2000, p129). Being a Black male has thus become intrinsically linked to issues of power, domination, authority over women and a loathing of homosexuality, and is as much a contemporary, societal construction as it is a biological feature.

This popularised mono-dimensional representation of Black maleness is not accepted for this study, and being male solely describes those who would be biologically identified in this way because they possessed one X and one Y chromosome. It would therefore be possible for an effeminate or gay Black male to be included in my inquiry. It was also equally possible to include males who did not hold homophobic attitudes. However, it is important to note that issues of gender alignment or gender re-assignment were not considered and, according to the definition I chose to adopt, any biological females who were undertaking gender re-assignment would not have been able to participate in this study. Although, as such surgical intervention is not normally offered until later in life, and most of the participants of this study were under 25, I do not believe that this stipulation excluded numbers (or indeed any) potential participants. Furthermore, this study was not primarily concerned with how issues of sexuality and perceived sexuality can influence a learner's educational experience.

In contrast to the violent, aggressive portrayal of Black males common at the end of the last century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, other popular representations of Black males have been informed by 'stereotypes that were first articulated in the nineteenth century' (hooks, 2004, pxiii) in which Black men were portrayed as 'lazy and shiftless' (hooks, 1992, p90) or 'cartoon-like creatures only interested in ... having a good time' (ibid). Collectively, these various negative representations of Black males continue to influence current thinking and to 'hold sway over the imaginations of citizens ... to the present day' (hooks, 2004, p xii). In this way Black males have become victims of inaccurate, stereotypical, and often archaic representations which have resulted in them being variously perceived within education as threatening, hostile, sexually intimidating and aggressive (Sewell, 1997; Blair, 2001; Swanson, Cunningham and Spencer, 2003). hooks describes the representation of Black males in even more dramatic terms, stating they are frequently portrayed as 'failures who are psychologically "fucked-up", dangerous, violent, sex maniacs' (1992, p89). These 'narrow representations of Black masculinity, perpetuated stereotypes (and) myths' (hooks, 1992, p89) persist to such an extent that they have been 'passively absorbed' (ibid) by many within education, the Black community and beyond. This one-sided presentation is further complicated as 'much of this literature is written by white people' (ibid) and there has been little opportunity for Black men or other Black people to either provide 'interventions on the stereotype' (hooks, 2004, pxii) or to comment on 'the way they are represented' (ibid). While acknowledging the work and efforts of other Black academics and researchers (for example Blair, 2001; hooks, 2004; Sewell, 2004; Rhamie,

2007), many of these stereotypes have persisted relatively unchallenged or contested. Such unsophisticated representations of Black maleness have served to mask the 'complexity of Black male experience' (hooks, 1992, p88), their many faceted lives, and have continued to distort images of Black maleness until the present times.

There is a social, moral and educational imperative for Black men and the Black community to respond to these issues and to challenge the way that Black males have been, and still are, represented. However, 'changing the representations of Black men must be a collective task' (ibid, p113) and needs to involve many more people than just those from within the Black community. All members of the research community, Black and white alike, are able, should they choose, to take an active role in this endeavour, and to provide other representations of Black masculinity. Phenomenological inquiry, using experience as 'the starting point' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, pxxiii) provides an opportunity for researchers to present other perspectives of Black boyhood and manhood, and the chance to tell other stories for the purpose of 'educat(ing) the self and others' (ibid, pxxvi). The alternative of missing the opportunity to provide a different perspective is to leave 'representations of the "black man" ' (Blount and Cunningham, 1996, px) to existing commentators, some of whom appear to have previously demonstrated a willingness to continue to perpetuate tired, out-dated and sometimes hostile representations of Black masculinity.

Like Rhamie, (2007) who offers a different representation of Black people and describes groups of Black learners who have enjoyed early academic success, or who after initial failure remain education-positive and return later in life to try continue their education, I want to be part of the Black community that chooses to engage with the challenge of providing alternative representations of Black males in education. Through supporting the research participants in articulating their views of the education system and by enabling them to represent their perspective of education, I have been able to use my research to depict another construction of Black maleness. I am not suggesting that my representation of Black male experience is a single '"true" state of affairs' (Pring, 2004, p46) for phenomenology suggests there can be many different, co-existing realities; nor am I proposing that my research negates previous representations of Black males, rather it is provided as another, alternative truth and 'invites us to question' (ibid, p112) some of the previous portrayals of Black males within education, and to look beyond some of the depictions of Black males .

In presenting the research participants' lived experience as another construction of reality, to stand alongside other existing representations, I needed to address three further issues. Namely, were the participants 'really able' (Punch, 2005, p253) to provide relevant information to help me explore my research interest; had they been truthful with me or had they told 'me what they (thought) I want(ed) to hear' (ibid) and had I ensured that I had faithfully, fairly and accurately reported this information?

If reality can be described as being in the world and 'is seen to encompass the body and the mind' (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p194), then the research participants were ideally situated to provide a comprehensive narrative on the experience of Black males in FE. They alone occupied that unique position of being a Black male learner in FE, and understood from firsthand experience what it meant to be a Black male studying at college. While it is likely there would be areas in which they had similar, or shared common experiences, with other groups, (for example white men, Asian males or Black women), only they could comment on how they experienced life in FE *as Black man*. The research participants therefore possessed the necessary knowledge to help me explore my research question and to explain what it felt like to be a Black male at FE. I was thus prepared to accept the 'respondents' knowledgeability' (Punch, 2005, p253) was sufficient to address the primary research area, and that the research participants' appreciation of college life enabled them to comment authoritatively on this area.

The integrity of any research project depends on the robustness of the data obtained. Although I employed appropriate triangulation techniques and checked the extent to which 'data converge(d) or diverge(d)' (ibid, p252) so that the data I presented could be considered valid, ultimately, I still had to trust that the research participants had chosen to be truthful with me and 'the possibilities of deceit' (ibid) were minimal. Henn, Weinstein and Foard suggest the likelihood that participants will be truthful can be improved if researchers take time 'to develop a rapport with those (they) are studying' (2006, p176). This in turn is influenced by whether or not the participants are willing to accept the researcher and are prepared to work with them. In this respect I had a distinct advantage as I had been based in the principal research college for 15 years and had the opportunity to establish a reputation as an accessible tutor, who students could speak openly to. Indeed, I became known as a 'safe' teacher, a position which was further supported by my insider status and assumed kinship. Although I lacked this advantage in the second college, I made efforts to establish an atmosphere which would support open dialogue. Further, in completing focus group and individual interview work with the

participants, I took time to establish a welcoming, open atmosphere which facilitated discussion. Because I made conscious efforts to work in an open and respectful way to gain the research participants' trust, I have confidence that the participants were truthful with me, and did not purposefully mislead me in any way. I discuss these issues fully in Chapter 2, *Locating Myself as a Researcher* and section *5.4. Using Qualitative Methods*.

When considering that I had faithfully, fairly and accurately reported the research participants' experiences, I needed to address two further questions. Firstly, was the data I chose to present 'a true sample of the data' (Punch, 2005, p253), and secondly did I actually provide a candid and precise representation of the information the research participants shared with me, or that I had found out through other means? I addressed these challenges in the following way.

As this study was exploratory, phenomenological inquiry, while I had thoughts and feelings about the inquiry (see Chapter 2, *Locating Myself as a Researcher*) I had no predetermined hypothesis I was trying to prove. In this respect, I was not tempted to be biased in my data selection, or to privilege some data above other information, as I was not trying to confirm or demonstrate a particular 'truth'. However, through a process of inductive analysis, I was able to identify key themes and chose comments or actions which typified the research participants' experiences, and illustrated these themes. I have used these comments or situations to help support the data presentation. As these comments were characteristic of the complete data set, in this respect the data I have produced for this study may be considered a true, representative sample of the data. I explore this point in more detail in section *5.6.4. Selection of Data for Thesis*.

To ensure that I provided an accurate representation of the participants' experiences I adhered to a classic research principle, and returned to the field to check the data I had collected with the research participants by seeking their views on how I had presented information. To achieve this I took my emergent findings back to the participants, and gave them an opportunity to check the accuracy of the data, or where I had provided interpretations of their words, to decide if I had provided a true and faithful representation of their views and experiences. Although this initially raised a difficult ethical dilemma for me, as the participants had indicated early on in the study that they did not wish to be involved with reading transcripts of interviews or observations, it was important that I found a way of involving the research participants at this crucial stage. This was eventually achieved by a compromise solution, in which I gave the participants a summary of my key findings to review and comment on. The

process I used to achieve this is fully described in section *5.3.1 Ethical Issues*. Because I was able to check the data in this way with the participants, and they were given full opportunity to comment on or correct the data in any way they chose, I am confident that my representations were an accurate reflection of their realities.

I was further able to ensure that I provided an accurate representation of the participants' experiences through utilising my position as an insider researcher, although accepting that because of a number of critical differences between myself and the research participants I could not be accorded full insider status. Many research reports are essentially an outsider's interpretation of a situation, even if efforts are made to incorporate the insider's voice. Although I have agreed in an earlier chapter that the outsider who adopts a critical position and asks searching questions is able to offer new insights into situations, there is a very different perspective that is provided by an insider working together with the research participants to help explain their understanding of a situation. While as an insider researcher I cannot claim exclusive, better or even more informed knowledge, *because* I possessed an insider's understanding of the participants' circumstances and *because* I was able to hear about and see their experiences with an insider's ears and eyes, I was able to use my position to help me interpret nuanced statements and actions, and so achieve a more accurate understanding of the participants' realities. Consequently, I was able to use my location to support me in providing a faithful and accurate representation of the participants' daily realties, and to ultimately understand the participants' experiences by drawing on my shared understanding of being a Black person in the UK and navigating the education system. Although there were, and are, significant differences between my own and the participants' experiences, I was able to employ my personal position to unearth information that could be concealed from an outsider, and to provide a situated, authentic interpretation of the participants' stories. A full discussion the issues of being an insider researcher are explored in section *2.1.2 The Insider/Outsider Dilemma*.

7.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have argued that representing realities and experience in research, particularly trying to represent the realities and experiences of other third parties, presents a difficult challenge, for it is predicated on determining the truth of a situation. However, 'the concept of truth is an elusive one' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p14), and I can only have an understanding of that which I witness, experience or I am told. And even at this point, I need

to concede that my truth and my interpretation of a situation may not accord with the understanding of others. Truth, therefore, like beauty remains in the eye of the beholder, and it is possible that we can never know whether or not we have determined the truth of any situation. However, perhaps to even believe in and accept the possibility of a single, definitive truth is a misguided endeavour, and is a redundant concept inherited from positivism, for it is possible that there can be many different truths co-existing simultaneously.

In trying to present another representation of Black males at FE I have accepted the material and sensational reality of this world which consists of people, objects and other items as well as thoughts, feelings and emotions, and that the Black males in my research will experience both the material artefacts and sensations of this world. However, I also acknowledge that there are many different realities and how I may experience the world and relate to people, objects, individuals and other entities is not fixed and will vary according to individual circumstances. In this much at least truth can be said to be contingent on place and time, and will depend upon the perceptions of a particular individual.

A fundamental purpose of research is to try and make sense of these different realities and to make known the different experiences that diverse groups may have. Much research in education on the experience of Black males has been written from an outsider perspective and most research has focussed on the statutory sector. Little has been written about the post compulsory sector, and even less has been written about the experience of minority groups in this sector, especially from an insider perspective. Most of the available literature confirms that Black males have little success in the compulsory education sector and receive little support. My research offers a different reality - a reality in which Black males have returned to the education system to try and achieve some degree of educational attainment. In contrast to their experiences in the statutory sector many of these Black males have enjoyed their time in the post compulsory sector, and all have benefited from the opportunity to gain more qualifications. The experience of the Black males in my research suggests that these learners want to succeed within education, but that there are significant obstacles in the statutory system which prevents some of them from doing so. My research suggests that within the post-compulsory sector a degree of success remains a realistic opportunity for learners from this group, and that is feasible for education to be an enjoyable experience.

CHAPTER EIGHT: REFLECTIONS, EMERGENT CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I aim to use the last chapter of this thesis to reflect on the discussions of the previous chapters. I intend to achieve this the following ways:

- Firstly I will review my research journey and the impacts this inquiry has had upon me, the research participants and others;
- Secondly, I will indicate the developing conclusions that have been suggested by my inquiry which have the potential to illuminate issues in other institutions and how the questions which have been raised during the course of my research may be useful questions to raise in other contexts;
- And finally, in looking beyond the boundaries of this study, I will provide tentative suggestions for future practice which may be useful in supporting the achievement of Black males studying in FE, and possibly in other environments.

This is the final chapter of my thesis. However, the education of Black males in the UK remains a debate in progress. I hope that other researchers will read this work and both challenge and extend the arguments I have presented on the most appropriate ways to support Black males in their journey through education. This is an unresolved issue and continues to demand the attention of educators, policy makers and researchers alike. Further, I believe this thesis, in investigating an under-researched area, has surfaced a variety of issues, adding to the canon of existing knowledge and fulfilling one of my key initial research aims in helping to make a difference to the education of Black males by adding new insights to this debate and by challenging current accepted norms.

8.1 Reflections – Reflective Practice and My Research Question

Before considering what impact this research has had on me, the research participants and others, I will first discuss the role reflective practice has played in my research. Research demands reflection. Without reflective practice, the development of the primary research question becomes problematic, synthesis of emerging information becomes difficult, evaluation of the legitimacy of argument is challenged and the creation of new ideas is questionable. Being a reflective practitioner involves constant, critical appraisal' (Tummons, 2007, p69) and is a mechanism which enables us to unravel 'all those aspects ... that get taken for granted' (ibid, p69) by exploring our 'assumptions and preconceptions' (ibid, p71). In

this way, reflective practice supports phenomenological research by enabling us to see afresh that which has become unquestionably accepted as the norm and encourages us to consider different perceptions of circumstances. Without reflection, at best there is only a replication of existing structures and ideas, or at worst, no more than stagnation and senescence remains.

Reflection ensures that 'research really involves the search for something' (Maso, 2003, p41) by challenging researchers to express their research question as 'a real and living doubt' (ibid) and is a critical part of question formulation. Although the 'search for something', may hint at a positivist approach to research, in that 'something' suggests singularity, in this instance it refers to ensuring that the researcher takes care 'to represent the sense of the question' (ibid) so that there is no ambiguity regarding the topic of research, and the proposed question has sufficient depth to merit further exploration.

This research did not begin as a research project, but was a gnawing doubt that would not go away and represents the culmination of a reflective period that spanned many years. It possibly began in a sub- or even unconscious way, as I observed the Black males I knew, in their journeys through education. At this stage in the process, I had not formulated a research question and only had an unspecified feel for the 'something' that I might wish to eventually research. These reflections became more sharply focussed when I began teaching and after a period of working for what was then a Section 11[11] funded project, I finally reached a point where I tired of 'repetitive ... navel gazing' (Tummons, 2007, p69) and decided to explore my embryonic thoughts and ideas in a more systematic way. It was only at this stage that I committed to the prospect of formally undertaking research. This is apparent from the very first page of my first research journal where I have written

> *I could call this day 1 of the study, but in reality it isn't because I have been thinking about things for a while. Today it was for real - today I committed myself and today I said I would.*

Personal Research Journal, 4 October 2004

At the start of this journey, although I had a general idea of the area I wanted to investigate, my ideas were an untidy jumble of views, thoughts and opinions – they were too general, too lacking in specificity. Through careful and probing questioning of colleagues in the research community I was forced to confront the extents and limitations of what was realistically

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[11] Section 11 = This was a centrally government funded initiative aimed at supporting minority ethnic students

possible within the constraints of a small scale research project. Further through completing essential subject-related reading, I was able to move beyond the limits of my initial understanding to more precisely identify the key issues of my area of interest. This is a point which I note in my journal when I have written 'this is a time for reading and reflection' (*Personal Research Journal, 6 October 2004*). This process of reading, reflection, incubation and refining supported me to more clearly articulate my ideas, and to construct a question that was 'a proper "translation" of what (was) important' (Maso, 2003, p42) to me and warranted further investigation.

While careful reflection is often the starting point of endeavour, and for me was the point at which my early questions were honed into a focussed, specific exploration, it also remained the bedrock of the research process, by allowing me to move back and forth, defining and redefining my ideas so I could chart new ways forward while remaining open to other possibilities of action and different interpretations of information. Utilising McLuhan's ideas, reflection became a process which I used to 'to advance backwards into the future' (1964, p73). A journey which had no pre-determined path, a journey which I had to constantly monitor and to plot, and re-plot my way forward. My reflective journal was a key part of this process as it enabled me to return to initial ideas and question my developing understanding of both the question and the research process itself. To a degree, the journal also helped to act as physical anchor, capturing my uncertainties and questions, and through active reflection and scholarly engagement with others, enabled me to explore these ideas in greater depth.

Thus, at all stages in completing my research, from the initial stages of question formulation, through constructing a research proposal, and actually conducting the research, reflective practice has characterised my journey and has enabled me to revisit, revise and reformulate my emergent ideas. Throughout this journey, aided by peer, colleague and supervisory support, I have continually engaged with an 'internal dialogue, and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of "what I know" and "how I know it"' (Hertz, 1997, pvii). These internal conversations and personal reflections have helped me to 'construct interpretations of (my) experiences in the field' (ibid, pviii), and it is through this process of reflection and reflexivity, looking inwards and back onto the stories and experiences the research participants shared with me that I have been able to 'provide insight on the workings of the social world' (ibid) of the Black males who took part in this research.

In addition to gaining insight into the social world inhabited by the research participants, reflexivity has enabled me to question 'how that knowledge came into existence' (ibid) and so challenge the basis of knowledge production. I have explored this issue in detail in Chapter 7, *Knowledge, Validity and Representing Reality*.

8.1.1. Impact of this Research

It is important to remember that at a fundamental level social research is a process which involves others. A social researcher will have nothing to discuss, unless they have been able to assemble data from the group(s) they have chosen to work with. It is also important to reiterate that researchers should follow appropriate ethical practices and any impact resulting from the research, should not be solely for the benefit of the researcher, but should also have a clear outcome for the research participants and the wider community. However, it is important to remember that not all outcomes may be positive and, as such, there is usually a risk associated with engaging in research either as a researcher or as a participant.

It is not always possible to determine the impact of an event or actions until after those events have occurred. Some outcomes will be hoped for and anticipated, others will be unexpected. Further, it is likely that the impact of certain activities may only become apparent long after the original endeavour has 'concluded', and in some regards, perhaps some activities never truly conclude, but mutate into new forms, or are picked up by others, and continue to exert their influence in different ways.

Research is one such activity – while researchers may leave the field, and bring their research to a conclusion, it can become the start of another group or individual's journey. Although I was able to identify some likely impacts, there would be other unanticipated (and possibly unwelcome) outcomes to this research which I could not reasonably hope to predict. In completing this research, I expected I would experience personal changes, I hoped that it would make some positive difference to those who participated in the research and I wanted my research to be heard and used by others within the education community so that they could use whatever influence they had to bring about change. This could be as small scale as a change in classroom practice or as far reaching as a change in policy. Although in submitting this thesis, I have reached a natural break in my research journey, I do not believe that this signifies an end of the impact of this research for me or others.

In considering impact, Sebba (2010) makes a useful distinction between dissemination and impact. While in the spirit of openness and transparency researchers may wish to share their finding widely, this does not necessarily mean that their findings will have a demonstrable impact. Further it is difficult to conclusively track a particular impact back to an individual research project. To a degree this argument is hindered by the lack of specificity in the term impact. Sebba provides further assistance here by differentiating between grades of impact, which begin with knowledge transfer, progress through to knowledge translation and end with knowledge use. Any research project may be capable of producing one, some of all of these impacts. Although it is useful for researchers to have some idea of the likely impact(s) of their research, phenomenological exploratory research does not easily provide opportunities to make precise predications of the nature of these eventual impacts. Indeed, as identified earlier it is possible that some consequences of research may not have been foreseen at all.

Sebba offers a final useful tool to assess the impact(s) of research and encourages researchers to consider *reach* (how widely the research has been felt within research and other communities), and *significance* (what difference has the research made within, upon and to those communities). For most small scale research projects it is likely that the eventual impact(s) will be small and localised. Nevertheless, findings of small scale, localised research projects should not be diminished as they may contribute to an accumulation of research findings which can later be used to inform policy development and implementation. However, even though fundamentally flawed and now widely discredited, as Wakefield's small scale research on 12 children and the postulated link between the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism published in the *Lancet* in 1998 demonstrated, (Seppa, 2010, Science news online) it is possible for small scale research to have dramatic and wide reaching impacts.

Elsewhere in this thesis I have explored how this research has affected me and the research participants. These can be found in section *2.1 The Significance of Personal Location*; section *2.3 Dilemmas in Writing*; Chapter 5 *Research Methodology*; and Chapter 7 *Knowledge, Validity and Representing Reality*. In Chapter 5, when I discussed ethical issues involved in this research, I expressed my doubt that I could never be truly certain that I had done *all* I could to value the research participants. At this point I find myself in a similar position, and I will only be able to identify *some* of the effects and *part* of the impact(s) produced by this research. Through careful and reflexive questioning I believe that I have

been able to identify the most significant of these. My purpose at this stage is to move beyond the issues previously discussed and to draw together themes of the impact(s) of this research on me, the research participants and the wider community. After considering these impact(s) and by reflecting on previous literature, I will conclude this chapter with a series of recommendations for future practice within education, to enhance the experience and promote the success of African and Caribbean males, as they navigate their way through the education system.

8.1.2. Personal Impact of the Research

Newby claims that 'undertaking a programme of research affects everyone who does it' (2010, p639). Further he states that an inherent difficulty with the research process is that 'we will be so caught up with producing the end product that we will lose sight of how the research process is changing us' (ibid, p 640). I believe that by engaging with research I have changed in ways that are beyond the changes I could expect to occur as a natural part of the ageing process or the changes I could have expected to happen if I had not chosen to complete this research. Hopefully I have, as the adage claims, become 'older and wiser', but while engaging in this research has not changed the nature of time, I believe it has changed my understanding of the participants' experiences; the ways in which I approach investigation; and has produced fundamental changes in me as a person. I believe that these changes have, in different ways, helped me to become wiser. A complex and sometimes contradictory wisdom, which while positively supporting my skills as a researcher, making me more thorough and analytical, have raised difficult questions for me causing me to challenge my actions and instincts, sometimes almost to the point of inertia.

While I 'retain my values and my commitment to trying to make a difference' (*Personal Research Journal, July 2009*), and still have a tendency to be 'drawn to solutions and answers which solve problems' (ibid), I can now more fully appreciate the difficulties this positivist position can produce and 'recognise this is not reality' (ibid). Researching has challenged my propensity to adopt positivist approaches and I have been forced to reconsider the notion that 'propositions which (are) neither analytically nor empirically testable ... have no meaning at all' and should be 'dismissed as emotive utterance, poetry, or mere nonsense' (Schön, 2005, p33).

Having a natural science background, this has been simultaneously liberating, exciting, revelatory, confusing and testing for me. It has forced me to leave the comfort of the 'high,

hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique' (ibid, p42) and move into the 'swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution' (ibid). I have been disturbed by this position and have wrestled with new ways of knowing and understanding. Although it remains a difficult conundrum for me, I now feel that 'the high, hard ground ... is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance' (ibid) and does not provide me with the opportunity to consider 'the most important and challenging problems' (ibid). In short, the 'high, hard ground' does not allow me the chance to research the areas that truly interest me and ultimately lacks the capacity to extend my understanding of the social world.

While positivists attempt and claim to offer assured certainty, and although I sometimes still crave the comfort of being able to know and prove situations beyond doubt, I now accept this is an elusive dream – a state of perfection that if it ever existed beyond the boundaries of the confidence of my youth, has been challenged in such a way that it is unlikely to ever return. However, even though I remain troubled by this position and may wish for the certainty of knowing there are irrefutable facts within the field of human experience, at the same time I welcome the alternative ways of knowing that qualitative inquiry provides, a knowledge that while it achieves the necessary standards of validity is ultimately borne out of 'experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through' (ibid, p43). In short a knowledge which can effectively capture the beauty, confusion, anger and hope of human experience; a knowledge which can capture the poetry of life.

Engaging in research has encouraged me to reject simplistic 'answers' and has helped me review issues in greater depth, seeking to employ a variety of approaches to investigate situations. Previously while I may have preferred singularity, I now recognise there can be multiple methods to investigate and multiple outcomes, all of which can be equally valid. Researching has taught me 'things about me, things about the process and things about the system' (*Personal Research Journal, July 2009*). Such an engagement has enabled me to become a more effective researcher, as it has forced me to challenge my own assumptions and to engage in processes in a deeper, more reflective fashion, obliging me to push and test the boundaries of what I believe I know, what appears to be known, what may be currently hidden and obliging me to attempt to untangle the inconsistencies and ambiguities of my own and others' experiences.

Without engaging in research it is likely that I would not have considered and engaged with issues in the same way. It is likely I would not have had the motivation to do so: this would have remained an unexplored, or under explored area and I would not have become aware of some of my personal contradictions and ambivalences in the same way.

8.1.3. Impact of the Inquiry on the Research Participants

'The vast majority of educational research has been done to make a difference' (Newby, 2010, p640) and many researchers hope that their work will have some influence beyond their personal and immediate environment. Having described the ways this research produced changes in me, I will now discuss the impact of this inquiry on the research participants.

While I believe that this study was significant to and did influence the students who chose to take part, identifying and discussing the impact this study has had for the research participants is a problematic and challenging issue. To a degree I believe this was compounded by the features which made me an outsider who was never granted total access rights to all aspects of the students' lives. Although I believe I was told information which the research participants believed to be an accurate portrayal of their experiences and I do not think the participants purposely lied to or attempted to deceive me, I am not certain they chose to share *all* features of their experience with me, or indeed, if they were consciously aware of all issues. In this respect, it is possible I received an edited, or possibly even a sanitised, version of events.

As part of a strange contradiction I believe this potentially vulnerable position was contributed to by my insider status and the participants thought it likely, that as a member of their community, I shared some of the values, beliefs and aspirations they did. As such, despite being willing to ostensibly talk openly, swear and adopt other unguarded behaviours with me, it is possible they chose to not fully disclose everything for fear of causing offence, hurt or shock to an older member of the same community. Further I believe they consciously made this decision as they did not want to risk losing a staff member who could be a potential ally at a later time and that the participants made a calculated, considered and politically motivated decision on the information they chose to share. Within this context I am only able to discuss the impacts I became aware of through discussions with the participants and other data I assembled.

From rereading the research transcripts, my field journal and my research journal, I am confident that the research acted as a positive affirmative experience for the students who chose to take part. The structure and pressures of contemporary life do not always readily afford the opportunity to take time to think and reflect. We can spend much of our time doing, have little time to savour being and even less time to consider what being means to us. Further, if our time is dedicated to surviving or ensuring that we are not placed at further disadvantage or discriminated against, it is possible we have even less time to engage with such reflection. The comments the participants made and the enthusiasm with which they joined in discussions led me to believe that there was little room in their lives for this kind of retrospection – often they were far too busy working out strategies to navigate the world with no time left to consider matters beyond the immediate. In short, most of their time was taken up simply getting by. My inquiry provided an opportunity to use time to reflect on, and to evaluate their experiences. It gave them a structured and supportive setting to discuss with others like them their collective and individual experience of education. It afforded them an opportunity to consider how they experienced education, how they perceived the different features of the educational world, what their experiences meant to them, and how they operated within this world. It drew to their attention some of the minutiae of life that could easily be overlooked or taken for granted – what, for example, is the significance of giving a tutor a title like 'sir' or 'miss'? What does being informed you are responsible for managing your own time tell you about the value system of an organisation? And what does this value system mean about the way you are likely to be treated? While such questions could give the appearance of being insignificant, collectively they gain in importance. Engaging with my research allowed the participants time to reflect on these different issues and although I do not believe they related their descriptions of their everyday experiences to phenomenological or reflexive frameworks, the inquiry afforded the participants an opportunity to revisit their understandings of the world of education and how they made sense of their experiences of and relationship to this world.

The discussions also indicated that the research helped to affirm a common, usually unarticulated bond, between the research participants within each of the two colleges and there was a feeling of solidarity with the other participants, corroborating the idea of fictive kinship (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1996). It appeared that many participants already understood this bond, but the research provided them with an opportunity to openly voice this belief and to confirm a position they intuitively knew. This in itself appeared to be

a useful and positive experience for the participants and they appeared to grow in confidence having assured themselves they had a secure ally base among their peers. To repeat the words of one of the participants JW 'care(d) for (his) own' (*L2 Sports Focus Group, line 313*) A fuller discussion of this aspect is provided in section *6.4.2 Peer Support* and *6.5 The Significance of Friendship Groups* earlier in this thesis.

I further developed the view that for many of the participants, this was one of the few times they had been afforded the opportunity to discuss their engagement with education in a positive way. As the premise for these discussions was exploratory rather than accusative, the participants began to think about what mattered to them in education, how they interacted with the various systems, their future pathways and, most significantly, how education could be structured to provide them with the support they needed to successfully navigate systems and achieve within education. I developed the view that the participants, while acknowledging the significant impact that structural inequalities such as institutional racism could produce, were more interested in focussing on what was needed to support their achievement and there appeared to be a focus on how they could work their way through the system while retaining the integrity of their identity.

Much of what I have said in this section is based on my interpretation of the participants' words and actions. However, this interpretation is based on the data I have collected during the course of this inquiry, which I checked with the research participants as part of the data validation process. Further, as an insider (to a degree) of this community, I was able to use my own personal knowledge and understanding of the Black British community to help me interpret the nuanced expressions of the research participants. While not claiming that all Black British communities have identical experiences, in the same way that Fordham (1996), Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Connor (2003) refer to collective community consciousness developed through a common and shared understanding, I was able to use my connection to the Black British community to assist me in interpreting my research findings. In am confident in my own mind, that I have presented an accurate interpretation of the available data and that I have fairly represented how my inquiry affected the research participants.

8.1.4. Impact of the Inquiry on the Wider Community

My ability to evidence the impact of my research has become progressively more difficult as I have moved further away from the original site of the research. Although I am able to report with confidence the personal impact produced by the research, and to some degree the

impact for the research participants, it is a much greater challenge to assess the impact of this inquiry on the wider community. Creating an influence or event(s) which resonates with the wider community is a significant challenge. Further it is very difficult to determine what pivotal event(s) may have precipitated any particular change and any eventual outcomes can seem tortuously slow. Notable exceptions to this general trend and relevant to this field are Coard's seminal report in 1971 which galvanised the Black community into action to challenge the discrimination faced by their children in schools and brought about changes to education practices , and the Macpherson Inquiry (1999) into the death of Stephen Lawrence which brought about changes to policing and was significant in the development of the Criminal Justice Act (2003) where the long standing principle of double jeopardy was reversed.

Further I believe that my aspirations for this research were, to a degree, both gendered and racialised. Although in some aspects of my life (as a JP, as a tutor and as a parent) others are obliged to listen to and respond to my views and thoughts, I am aware that such influence is not automatically conferred to research projects. In research, voice is gained through the strength of argument, and it is the strength of argument that accords authority to research projects. While not wishing to portray myself as a helpless victim of contemporary life unable to influence any outcomes at all, I am aware that I am not a renowned researcher and at the back of my mind I cannot help wondering 'who would want to listen to what I might have to say?' My inquiry was a small scale investigation and correspondingly my ambitions were proportionate for the size of project, reflect my status as a researcher and were tempered by a degree of scepticism. Rather than believing my research would catalyse change, I believed it would contribute to a growing body of knowledge, and to quote another maxim from the oral tradition of many cultures but one which has characterised the experiences of many people of colour and women, 'I was hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst'.

I also needed to acknowledge that 'simply presenting research results to policymakers and expecting them to put the evidence into practice (was) very unlikely to work' (Young, 2008, online). This position was further complicated as some policy makers appear to be 'practically incapable of using research based evidence' (ibid). However, if I wished to accelerate change I needed to take advantage of the apparent growing 'willingness to accept and act on a weight of evidence' (Newby, 2010, p641) among some central and local policy makers. Consequently from the very outset of my inquiry, it was important that I identified how I intended to influence change and what networks I would need to support such change.

At the beginning of my research journey I was committed to engaging with the investigation, and had hopes that this research would have an effect, although I did not appreciate the need to identify *how* such effects, if any, would be achieved. Consequently I did not fully understand the need to plan an appropriate dissemination strategy so that my research could have an impact on education and other communities. A result of this omission at the planning stage means that to date, the impact(s) of my research on wider communities have, thus far, been limited. Even though this was a significant omission from the planning stages, I have been able to utilise the networks I have formed through my personal, academic and working life to inform colleagues of my work. In furtherance of my aim to make a difference I have presented at two national conferences (BERA 2007 and 2008), given internal seminars at NTU, presented some of my emerging findings to the first urban College's management team in Spring 2006 and I have been invited to present this work to the Network of Black Professionals.

Although this was a small scale study and as such the scope of influence is limited I hope that my study can be considered part of a body of evidence and will be capable of being used by others so that it can have an impact beyond the personal changes that I have experienced.

8.2 Emergent Conclusions

The way in which knowledge is constructed and presented is influenced by the individual collecting the information and to this each person will bring a unique set of life, work and personal experiences (see section *7.1 The Epistemological Framework)*. From my personal experience in my work as a magistrate, before reaching a conclusion, I am directed to consider the quality of evidence available. I am obliged to use one of three different tests to check the robustness of a decision. The most rigorous of these tests is 'so that I am sure'. While this could be considered an almost impossible standard to achieve, based on the evidence provided, in my own mind I need to be *certain* of the position I have adopted. The next test is 'beyond reasonable doubt' and while not completing removing the possibility of doubt, again based on evidence, I need to be confident that most people would be persuaded that certain event(s) had occurred. The final test is 'on the balance of probabilities' in which I believe it is more likely than not, that particular action(s) occurred. Satisfactorily achieving any one of these tests is sufficient to find a matter proven in law. While such tests do not claim to uncover the truth, when considering my research findings I found it useful to hold these judicial tests in mind to help me decide on the significance of the information provided.

However education and social research is not a judicial arena and it employs its own tests of validity (see section *7.2 Achieving Validity)* which although not mirroring the judicial system, have similarities with it, for in completing research individual researchers *must* have a high level of confidence in their findings.

This is the constant challenge for social researchers. Scientific researchers can experiment and claim to demonstrate cause/effect relationships, but this luxury is not so readily available to social researchers, for in situated research it is often impossible to replicate circumstances or recreate situations. Indeed, using the language of the judicial system, perhaps the best that can be achieved by social researchers is that the wider community is persuaded 'beyond reasonable doubt' that a certain situation exists. Throughout my research I have struggled with this difficulty. Although I am confident that my research has provided new perspectives which *do* make a contribution to existing knowledge, I am mindful I am unlikely to ever achieve the highest legal or scientific tests of assured certainty.

While acknowledging there have been improvements over the years, literature describes a bleak picture for Black males in secondary and higher education, characterised by academic underachievement, social exclusion and a willingness of some teaching staff to accept negative stereotypical representations of Black males (see sections *4.3, The Academic Location of Black Males in the Secondary and Further Education Sectors'* and *4.4 The Social Positioning of Black Males in Secondary Schools and FE*). However, there is relatively little information that specifically considers the experiences of Black males in FE. The purpose of my research was to explore the experiences of Black males when they attended FE, the sector in between school and higher education (see section *2.2.1 My Motivation to Complete the Research*): was it possible that FE might provide a different experience for this group, or was it just another link in a continuum of failure, disappointment and marginalisation stretching from secondary schools through to Universities? As there is still little specific literature that considers this issue, my research represents an important contribution to the body of knowledge regarding the educational experiences of Black males in the UK.

The realities and experiences of any group are inevitably situated in time, within a social construct and within a particular geographical space. This caveat equally applies to my study. While my inquiry was pertinent to the location in which I conducted my investigation, it has provided 'no more than a snapshot of some lived experiences' (Rhamie, 2007, p115) of a small group of Black males studying in two FE colleges. However, this research is still

useful, because it helps to 'illustrate the complexities of human nature, social interactions and reactions' (ibid) within the study environment. I do not, would not, cannot, claim the findings of my inquiry represent a universal picture. Readers of this thesis will need to determine for themselves whether they believe these findings might be relevant to other groups or other environments.

From the different interlinked and interdependent factors which combine to make up the whole experience of Black males in FE, the following key conclusions can be drawn from my research findings. I have not attempted to rank these conclusions, as each is significant to the total experience of Black males in a different way. Consequently, it would be difficult to justify how any one issue took precedence over any other factor.

8.2.1 FE: A Different Offer

Although part of the mainstream education system, FE both positions and prides itself as a different offer to secondary school and HE. It has attracted a number of uncomplimentary labels from government and has been called 'the neglected middle child' by Sir Andrew Foster (2005) and the 'Cinderella service' by Alan Johnson when he was Secretary for Education (BBC News, 2006, online). Equally, some learners have also shown a degree of ambivalence towards the sector and while wanting to participate in college programmes have come to regard colleges, not so much as a seat of learning, but as the '"last chance saloon" for students of all ages who may have either left school with few or no qualifications or indeed have rather chequered school or learning histories' (Salisbury and Jephcote, 2008, p 151). In many regards, FE has come to be viewed (and possibly presented) as the 'make do and mend' sector of education, operating on the margins of mainstream provision. This positioning, whether perceived or actual, can be simultaneously interpreted as a blessing and a burden. While FE's peripheral situation may have meant that it has received a lower level of financial resourcing, it has also been under a lesser degree of public scrutiny than compulsory education. This has provided the sector some freedoms and even though often operating in a climate of extreme uncertainty the FE sector has, to a degree, has been able to retain and further develop its own unique identity which separates it from secondary education and the HE sector (Fieldhouse, 1998; Kelly, 1992; Vella, 1994; Battacharyya, Ison and Blair, 2003). Further details of these differences are described in *4.2 The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and FE Sectors*.

The eclectic nature of FE (see section *3.1.1 The Historical Origins of FE; 3,1,2 The Current Structural Position of FE* and *3.3.3 The Primary Function of FE Colleges*) provides a stark contrast with the statutory sector and appears to offer perceptible benefits for some groups, particularly those who have experienced 'low expectations' (Morrison, 2010, p75) in previous learning environments. In common with other groups who may be presented as educationally disadvantaged (for example working-class people, refugees and late returners), Black males appear to be one group of learners that have taken advantage of FE's different offer. While previous research has shown that other groups of learners have enjoyed the less 'controlling environment' (Salisbury and Jephcote, 2008, p 154) of colleges and have appreciated 'the more relaxed, less rigid college timetable', 'the availability of free time', 'the use of first names with college teachers', the lack of 'petty rules and less regimentation' (ibid), together with the opportunity to dress in a style of their choosing, it has not been clear if such advantages were also available to Black male learners in the same way. My research demonstrates that FE does not appear to discriminate against Black male learners, providing the same, *equal* opportunities to Black males as other students. It was this difference which was so enjoyed by the Black students who participated in my inquiry, particularly those learners who had undergone other, more bruising learning experiences in other education sectors. This is a significant finding of my research and although it is clear that not *all* colleges have been successful in meeting the needs of *all* their learners, 'most colleges are keen to play their part in developing an inclusive society' (Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, 2002, p19) and to support the needs of its many and diverse clients. My research supports the view that the culture of colleges appeared to provide Black males with the opportunity to 'just be how (they) are' (see section *4.5 Black Students Presentation of Self in Secondary and FE Sectors*), their true and congruent selves. The consequence of this difference is released from the imposition of strict controlling environments and damaging stereotypical perceptions prevalent in the secondary sector, the Black males who took part in my research were able to use the FE sector to re-enter education and access mainstream opportunities from which they had previously been excluded. However, it is important to state that the equality of respect provided for Black males in FE also appears to apply equally to other previously marginalised groups. In other research with excluded and disaffected young people Attwood, Croll and Hamilton reported that FE staff had been successful in establishing productive learner/tutor relationships with this group, which similarly to the Black males in my study, had promoted their effective 're-engagement with education' (2004, p111).

When considering the curriculum, FE again presents itself as a very different learning environment, in which learners can access choices not routinely available elsewhere. An environment in which it is accepted 'that adults or, more specifically, non-graduate adults can make sensible decisions for themselves' (Wolf, 2010, p20). This is a particularly pertinent issue for Black learners who, while in school, often had academic and curriculum choices made for them, frequently based on 'societal ... and negative stereotypes about their abilities'(Steele, 2009, p164). Because many Black male students do not 'fit in with the dominant cultural values perpetuated through the school system' (Byfield, 2008, p13) in the UK, they have repeatedly been placed into lower streams or bands where their opportunities are limited and their chances of progression restricted. My findings demonstrated that the opportunity to have some influence over their curricula choices was a particularly welcome aspect of FE for the Black males who participated in my study. They were enthusiastic that on entering FE they were treated as adults capable of making 'good choices for themselves' (Wolf, 2010, p21) with 'clear ideas about what they were interested in, and about where their self interest' lay (ibid) . In FE Black males were able to construct a curriculum based primarily on *their* choice rather than institutional direction. This in itself was a highly motivating feature of studying at college for the research participants. The opportunity to make their own choices about subjects studied, links well with contemporary government ideas of personalised learning, and that *all* students (even younger learners studying in schools) should be supported to construct a curriculum which is relevant to their individualised needs.

Although, the relative academic freedoms of FE could be seen to be a positive feature of colleges, it also holds a potential danger for Black males. Black males are rarely presented as academic, well motivated students and are more commonly portrayed as being part of a 'laddish culture of boys that disparage academic work' (Byfield, 2008, p47). However, Black people are popularly accepted as having particular talents in sports, music and performing arts and many Black students appear to gravitate to these areas by choice. While some individuals may be suited to studying these subjects, tutors who are willing to accept a pre-determined stereotypical view of Black students' abilities, may inappropriately direct Black learners to these areas of study thus limiting Black students' opportunities to study other, more traditionally academic, disciplines (Steele, 2008; Youdell, 2004; Sewell, 2004). Indeed, in an effort to quash stereotypical preconceptions that tutors, other students and sometimes learners themselves may hold of Black males, Sewell working, collaboratively

with the University of the West Indies and Imperial College in London, began the 'Generating Genius' programme which 'attempt(s) to reverse underachievement among Black schoolboys and turn some into the next generation of doctors and scientists' (Sewell, 2009, p1). Although this programme is targeted at school students, there may be lessons for FE colleges in how they advise and guide Black students on their study choices, and how to encourage Black students to consider studying more academic subjects.

The findings from my research suggest that FE appears to achieve its aspiration of providing a different offer and it appears to have been successful in creating a more inclusive culture which is respectful towards and meets the needs of Black learners. This is in direct contrast to many Black males' experience of schools where they still report having 'experienced direct racism, either from pupils or teachers' (Ritchie, 2010, p28) and fear unequal treatment because of their ethnicity. Indeed this issue is further complicated by some schools' apparent willingness to ignore the 'openly racist attitudes among pupils' (Ghouri, 1999, TES online) and the 'racist bullying' (Bloom[a], 2009, TES online) which occurs in their schools. This has led to some commentators in the education press to report that government policy on 'race-related education and equality in schools has been a litany of "broken promises" ' (Bloom[b], 2009, TES online). In contrast many colleges have made positive progress in managing race related incidents and have 'sound processes for receiving learners' complaints and analysing them' (Ofsted[a], 2005, p11). Unfortunately, however, this is not the case for all colleges and 'in a minority of colleges complaints were not always analysed to see whether they were related to equality of opportunity' (ibid) which could potentially leave some problems hidden from view.

8.2.2 The Significance of Support Systems

Historic and contemporary literature agree that appropriate support is a key feature in Black students having a positive learning experience and achieving academic success (Blair, 2001; Sewell, 2009; Byfield, 2008; Rhamie, 2007). This position was also echoed by the findings of my research, and appropriate support is crucial in enabling Black males to feel part of the college community. However, such support cannot and should not be solely provided by the school or the college but needs to be part of an integrated framework, which extends beyond the boundaries of the college, comprising a range of different organisations and sources including home, peers and other support agencies.

A critical feature of these support networks was the assistance given by the college staff. The students who took part in my inquiry understood the inherent power balances within the education system. They understood how their academic achievement could be (or had been) influenced by teachers who acted as gatekeepers to their school success. Some of the research participants had experienced first-hand negative 'differential treatment' (Byfield, 2008, p39) or had been the victims of 'low expectations' (ibid, p38) by their teachers. The Black students who participated in my study were not looking for or seeking special favours from the education system but wished to participate on an equal footing with their peers, and understood the difference tutors could make to their educational opportunities and eventual progression. However, in contrast to their white peers, for many Black students entering FE positive staff/tutor relationships had to be rebuilt and students needed to regain confidence in an education system (and educators) that had previously failed them. In short Black males had to take the risk of putting their trust back into the education system.

For all students 'good interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils are fundamental to successful teaching and learning' (ibid, p80), but these relationships become even more significant for those learners who have had a negative schooling experience. For the Black males who engaged with my inquiry, positive student /teacher relationships were more likely to succeed if learners genuinely believed staff cared about them. On some occasions this meant 'assuming the role of ... surrogate parent' (Humphrys, 2010, p2) and the students needed to believe that tutors had their 'best interests at heart' (Byfield, 2008, p85). For Black males, this appears to require a certain form of parenting, a parent who is prepared to 'lock down the destructive instincts that exist within all males' (Sewell, 2009, p33) while simultaneously maintaining good humour. This was particularly important to Black males who have not had the benefit of a stable and reliable male figure in their lives. Similarly Sewell in his Generating Genius Programme 'deliberately constructed a role which would allow the boys ... to *respect* and also *fear* (him)' (ibid, p31) (my emphasis), the archetypal firm but fair parent. In my study Claudius provided such a Black male role model to the students, pressuring them to do well while making it clear he was doing this to support them to reach their potential, and despite being initially 'uncomfortable in this role' (ibid) Sewell chose to maintain this persona 'because the boys seemed to like it' (ibid). Further it appeared that this role was not only liked by the boys, but to provide the structure and discipline the boys needed to achieve their academic goals.

This was a clear difference between college and school and some school teachers appeared to delight in creating an environment where Black males were 'disrespected, talked down to, over-monitored, blamed for things they did not do, and given no chance to tell their side of the story' (Byfield, 2008, p80). However, it is important to note that not all secondary schools are the same and although some secondary schools appear to be unable to cater for the needs of Black males, others such as Phoenix High School in West London, accredited as being 'the best performing school in England' (Humphrys, 2010, p2) support *all stu*dents, regardless of ethnicity, to achieve high academic standards.

The issue of mentoring requires specific attention at this point. While student mentors 'received official approval when they were introduced into British schools through the UK Government's *Excellence in Cities* policy in 1999' (Russell, 2009, p57) and have been used in some schools and colleges to support learners and learning where they have 'been particularly successful' (Majors, Wilkinson and Gulam, 2003, p208), rather than being co-ordinated these schemes sometimes 'have developed as part of an organically evolved strategy' (ibid, p211), supporting my earlier suggestion that Black males themselves are best placed to identify solutions to the issues they face. However, in relation to structured, organised mentoring, the findings from my research were inconclusive. None of the students who participated in my research were involved in formal mentoring relationships and although issues of racial identity were discussed and were sufficiently significant for the participants to comment that they would have positively appreciated having the opportunity to work with Black male teachers, they did not specifically identify the need for a separate Black male mentor. Instead they used staff members that 'took a personal interest in them, encouraged them, were friendly towards them, treated them equally and provided them with opportunities to excel' (Byfield, 2008, p81). These are the type of features that would characterise a mentoring relationship (Wallace and Gravells, 2007; Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005) and students identified tutors who possessed these skills to support them in their learning, thus apparently removing, or at least minimising the need for a formal mentor.

It is possible that students used these mechanisms through lack of choice and were obliged to create their own support mechanisms. However, it is also possible that these improvised systems were the most appropriate to service their learning needs. If this is the case, the challenge to colleges is not whether or not to buy in mentors, but how to develop processes which will enable existing college staff to more formally support students.

To complement support provided by staff all learners who took part in my inquiry utilised peer and friendship groups to help them navigate the education system, and rather than a 'cathartic expression of frustrated power and social maladjustment' (Wright, Standen and Patel, 2010, p83) the males who participated in my study used their peer group as a mechanism of 'positive action and control' (ibid). Other researchers have also found that peer support can helpfully assist learners to overcome obstacles and succeed in education. Sewell relates the story of a secondary tutor who directed a 'bright and disciplined boy ... to take an "unruly" student under his care and supervision, whereupon complaints about his bad behaviour diminished significantly' (2009, p115). Other learners, almost intuitively understand what is needed to help peers refocus their energies in a positive manner. Building on this premise, some schools have taken the decision to introduce learner support groups to allow students 'space to talk' (Morrison, 2008, p 13) as a way of helping them to manage their academic and personal concerns, with the ultimate goal of enabling students to move to a position of 'giving each other advice' (ibid, p14). Peers are in a unique position to offer support to their colleagues, they have often had similar experiences and share a common understanding with other students. While they may not be the voice of academia or authority, they *are* the authentic voice of experience and perhaps understand more than any other group how it feels to be a student in the education system of the twenty first century. Further, they have the advantage of not only knowing *what* needs to be said, but also *how* this information should be expressed. The challenge for all phases of the education system, schools, universities *and* colleges is, rather than leave the development of such systems to chance and luck, how can this experience be harnessed so that learners are enabled to use each other as a source of support in their decision making and progression through the education system.

All learners who took part in my study recognised the significant support that was provided by their home environment and found their families to be a particular source of strength 'acting as a site of support and nourishment for the development of positive and healthy identities' (Wright, Standen and Patel, 2010, p60) and consistently demonstrating a willingness to be actively involved 'in their sons' education' (Byfield, 2008, p139). Indeed, the research participants suggested they 'derive(d) much of their determination for "getting on" from their parental orientation and both the passive and active support this engendered' (Mirza, 2009, p15).

However, although the learners who participated in my study were clear that they had benefited from strong family support, families that digress from

the traditional classic ... nuclear family ... of the father who is head of the household and economic provider; the mother who is the homemaker and provides domestic care and socialises the children, and the helpless and dependent children whose emotional, financial and welfare needs are met by their parents

Wright, Standen and Patel, 2010, p60

 are in danger of being viewed as abnormal. However, the 'idea that a Black child can be brought up and nurtured in an isolated nuclear family is historically an alien concept to many African and Caribbean families' (Black Parent Network, online).   Furthermore, while the idea of the nuclear family appears to maintain popular currency, (especially among some religious fundamentalist groups, the tabloid press and traditional Conservative politicians) it is becoming a historic artefact which does not fully reflect the way families are constituted in the UK today. The 2001 UK census showed 'just under one in ten households in England and Wales (were) lone-parent (9.6 per cent)' with 'an increasing proportion of children born outside of marriage' and 'around half of Black Caribbean (48 per cent) and Other Black (52 per cent) households with dependent children were headed by a lone parent. The percentage for the white British group was 22 per cent' (National Statistics, online). Within this context, the Black population may be presented as 'problematic and undesirable... and when difficulties emerge, they themselves are blamed and punished' (Wright, Standen and Patel, 2010, p60) for choosing to adopt a different family organisation to the stylised nuclear family. More crudely phrased the failure of Black youth in education is constructed as a situation which 'classically dysfunctional' (Mirza, 2009, p55) Black families have brought on themselves through inadequate parenting of their sons.

Such a narrow view, however, does not adequately accommodate or recognise the extended nature of the Black extended family which is

a multigenerational, interdependent kinship system which is welded together by a sense of obligation to relatives ... and has a built in mutual aid system for the welfare of its members and the maintenance of the family as a whole.

Martin and Martin, 1978, p1

Within such a kinship system being a lone parent is not necessarily a problem, as families can rely on the support of a network of relatives to assist in child rearing and fulfil a parenting function. It is this more positive construction of the Black family unit that the learners who

took part in my inquiry benefited from and it is important to note that many Black families 'have done and are doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances to support their children' (Black Parent Network, online). Equally, however, it is important to remember this is not the case for all Black families and in many urban areas extended family networks have been replaced by gangs who 'are the new extended families' (Umunna, 2007, online) for a worrying number of young Black people, providing the support traditionally given by family members. This in itself is not necessarily problematic, as peers can be a helpful source of guidance and support, as illustrated earlier in this section and in the findings of my research. However, if the value system of the gang is based on anti-social behaviour and violence it can lead to numerous problems including school failure and criminality. Unfortunately exploring these issues is outside of the remit of this study and they have not been considered in this thesis.

8.2.3 Academic Achievement of Black Males in FE

The position regarding academic underachievement of Black males is complex, and describing students as 'Black' in this instance is probably unhelpful as it masks other significant factors including socio-economic status, parental occupation, gender and nationality. Similarly, describing students as 'white' does not provide an adequate description of the many different factors that combine to produce student achievement. Unravelling these different factors which may be linked in a variety of ways presents a significant challenge.

National test data collected in the UK for key stage 1 (5-7 years) key stage 3 (11-14 years) and first public exam sittings (age 16) reveal 'the mean scores of Black African, Black Caribbean (and) Black Other are below the mean for White British peers' (Strand, 2010, p2). Although it is now accepted that at all key stages 'white boys from poorer socio-economic backgrounds achieve lower ... than any other main group' (Weston, 2010, p1) and appear to be 'particularly vulnerable to low parental social class' (Strand, 2008, p2). Strand's 2010 findings confirm that Black students are still at risk of underachieving relative to the majority of their peers and, as such, remain a cause for concern. While it appears that white boys from poorer backgrounds are especially susceptible to low academic achievement, Gillborn's analysis produces a very different interpretation of this same data. He argues

> *the data shows that, far from the picture of white failure generated by media coverage*
> *of the statistics, white non-FSM students – of both sexes – are more likely to succeed*

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than their peers from Pakistani, Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Other and
Dual Heritage (White/Black Caribbean)backgrounds.

Gillborn, 2008, p56

Effectively Gillborn makes the case that while there is low achievement by white working class boys, to highlight this one feature manages to successfully ignore 'non-FSM students (who) form the great majority of the cohort (86.6 per cent of the young people)' (2008, p55) and gives a distorted picture of academic achievement across the sample, directing attention away from Black underachievement across all socio-economic groups, back towards the white majority.

Within the statutory sector Ofsted has recognised there is a need to address ongoing achievement issues across different groups issues and 'in the new Ofsted framework there is a key focus on the achievement of any vulnerable group' (Weston, 2010, p1). In this framework white working class boys and *all* Black boys (regardless of their social positioning) should be considered priority groups for attention. Unfortunately Ofsted have not identified how such persistent underachievement could be addressed or what positive intervention strategies are needed.

While it appears there are continuing issues relating to achievement in the statutory sector, this picture does not seem to be mirrored in FE, both in terms of academic outcome and experience (see previous section, *8.2.1 FE: A Different Offer)*. The National Audit Office reported that there had been 'a substantial improvement in recent years' (NAO, 2001, p2) in the number of students successfully completing college courses, so that from 1994 to 1999, achievement rates rose from 65 per cent to 74 percent' (NAO, 2001, p15). More recent benchmarking data compiled by the LSC indicated that 'the upward trend in learner achievement (had) been sustained across all types of FE provider and across all notional NVQ levels of learning aim' (LSC, 2005, online). Furthermore,

success rates of learners from ethnic minorities in 2004/05 have all shown increases
of between 1 and 3 percentage points compared to 2003/04. Black African, Black
Caribbean and Chinese ethnic groups have all shown the greatest improvement in
success rates and in each of these groups, success rates for males have increased
more than for females.

ibid

Placed in the context of the types of learners who attend college courses, for example those who have previously not achieved qualifications, adult returners, as well as those who have had challenging learning experiences, this can be seen to be a significant achievement. This position was also echoed by the findings of my research and all learners who participated in my inquiry were successful in achieving their primary learning outcome. Considering that some learners who participated in my study had previously been excluded from their secondary schools, the importance of achieving in FE becomes even more profound and it appears that FE is successful in supporting many different learners in realising their educational goals.

8.3 Developments for Future Practice

> *If there is one concept that dominates European social policy discourse in the early years of the twenty-first century it is 'social exclusion'. It is deemed to be the principal reason why contemporary societies lack cohesion. The solution, it is suggested, lies in policies that actively promote social inclusion. This would be helpful, if it were not for the eerie silence about ... how the goals are to be achieved.*

> Ratcliffe, 2004, p1

Colleges are microcosms of wider society and like wider society, must embrace how they will work to ensure that *all* are fairly included in the college community. In this next section, while not shattering the 'eerie silence', I will explore some suggestions which might be useful in helping to promote further developments in the education system to support the achievement, enhance the experience of Black males in the FE sector and to move towards a position where Black males are fully included in college communities. If, as a society we are to embrace the challenges of the future, we need to build 'a plural community' (Potter, 2005, p29) and unfortunately colleges have barely begun to develop their 'policies for social inclusion' (ibid).

The negative experience for Black males in secondary and higher education is a situation which has grown up over time. Although FE appears to have been able to address some of these concerns and has provided an environment which seems more suited to the needs of Black males and encourages academic achievement, there are still many areas in which further improvements could be made. It would be easy to suggest simple, glib answers here. Such answers would mask the complexity of the situation and would obscure the need for a

multifaceted strategy which adequately reflects the challenging nature of this position. For such a complicated and difficult situation which has persisted for such a very long time, at best it would be optimistic to believe there could be simple solutions that could be quickly implemented and at worse would demonstrate a callous disregard for the prevailing circumstances with no real intention of trying to bring about improvements. The challenge in 1971, when Coard reported on the underachievement of Black males in England was how to initiate change in the education system so that it adequately provided for the needs of all Black children. While there has been progress towards achieving this aim, the challenge of producing a system in which all learners can achieve and thrive, still remains.

8.3.1 The Eradication of Racism

Race, racism and equality have been persistent themes that have permeated this thesis (for example see sections *4.1.1 Black* and *6.7 Racism in Schools, Colleges and Wider Society*). Yet defining racism is problematic as it has many facets and evolves and changes with time and location, suggesting that the challenges encountered by one community are not necessarily the same as the issues faced by another community. The issue of racism has been further complicated by those who 'believe that a colour-blind approach is the best way to end discrimination' (Anderson, 2010, p240), even though 'individuals spontaneously and unconsciously categorise people by race (and) snap decisions are made' (ibid) based on a person's assumed racial origin (see section *4.4 The Social Positioning of Black Males in Secondary Schools and in FE).* Furthermore 'in the context of racism, the colour-blind perspective can be used to justify inaction through denial, thereby maintaining the current power structure and preserving privileges of the dominant group' (ibid, p250) and 'the stronger the colour-blind attitudes people have the less likely they will be to support affirmative action' (ibid, p246).

One of the principal problems with a colour blind approach is 'it functions to erase differences among people and it forces those who differ from the white norm to assimilate into or to imitate whiteness'(ibid, p260) forcing Black people to embrace 'the idea of becoming the Other' (Fordham, 1996, p22). In this sense, although colour-blindness may position itself as a kind of benevolent non-intervention strategy, 'the polite language of race' (Mirza, 2009, p45), the fact that it fails to recognise and accommodate difference, makes it racist because it is incapable of providing for the *differing* needs of *different* groups. It is racist through the failure to take action and to acknowledge that diversity demands a range of

responses. Colour blindness fails as a strategy through its apathy, 'its well-meaning false optimism' (ibid). Framed in this way colour blindness reveals itself as no more than a lame excuse used by those who would wish to 'ignore the realities of racism and social divisions' (ibid). Colour-blindness is dangerous because it refuses to 'challenge racism' (ibid), and without challenge there can be no removal of this social injustice.

Bhavnani, Mirza and Meetoo, suggest that racism can be defined in the following way:

> *Racism operates along at least three axes. First it is characterised by denigratory stereotyping, hatred and violence. Second, it sets in motion cycles of disadvantage. Third, it negates and even obliterates the culture, religion and language of groups concerned.*

> 2006, p15

This is a useful definition as it helps to define the scope and the scale of the problem. While Bhavnani, Mirza and Meetoo's definition encompasses individual and societal responses, it does not adequately define institutional racism, a different process in which the procedures of organisations work to systematically disadvantage certain groups, a process which is very challenging to confront especially as there is still 'confusion in understanding institutional racism' (ibid, p30).   It is these three different expressions of racism, individual, societal and institutional that colleges need to consider and respond to, especially as 'many commentators have cited institutional racism ... in the education system as the cause' (DfES, 2006, p26) of disadvantage.

Although there may now be recognition of the damage that racism in all its forms, from benign colour-blind denial to overt racist behaviour, can do to the life chances of groups and individuals, it remains an emotive term which some people and institutions find difficult to accommodate or even acknowledge. This in itself is an issue as it can lead to failure to engage with and address the issues involved. However, 'perhaps an inflammatory term is needed to tackle the complacency and intransigence that has led to the existence of institutional racism in the education system' (ibid) and, rather than focussing on the sensitivities of those that find racism a difficult term, it would be more useful for colleges to devise processes to remove racism from the education system.

Within this context, it is important to recognise that 'racism is a complex social reality with a long and painful history and it would be arrogant to suggest that there are any '"off-the-peg"

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answers' (Dadzie, 2004, p ix). While 'the case for antiracism has been has been firmly established ... the challenge to schools in the 21st century is to translate it into viable day-to-day practice' (ibid) to ensure that Black students are neither intentionally nor unintentionally harmed by the education system, both by the structure of the system itself or those working within it. Gillborn argues that 'no field of social policy can eradicate racism from society: racism gains strength from too many quarters simply to be taught out of existence' (1995, p2). Further 'answers', to this complex and persistent issue are not waiting to be found in the way that positivists find solutions to problems, but will be created by the efforts and energies of those committed to bringing about change and are likely to be different for different institutions. There was in 1971 when Coard first reported on the inequalities in the education system, and is now, a moral, social, ethical and educational imperative for colleges to develop practices that will support them in at least reducing and ultimately removing racist influences because 'the education system *does* have the potential to challenge racism in ways that may have a lasting impact on (school) students (*of all ages and ethnic backgrounds) and the communities of which they are part*' (ibid) (my emphasis).

Earlier in this thesis I have argued that college staff are a fundamental feature of college life, acting as gatekeepers to student progression and having significant influence in creating the college's culture (see sections *4.2 The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and FE Sectors* and *6.1 The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges*). As such, college-staff have a key role to play in removing racism from the college environment. To achieve this aim colleges need to ensure that they:

- recruit staff with appropriate attitudes who are supportive of social justice and promoting change;
- provide existing staff with training which supports them to work with and meet the needs of diverse client groups.

Most job descriptions for organisations in the public sector now require potential employees to show a commitment to equal opportunities and to agree to follow relevant workplace policies. Further, most organisations will enquire at interview if potential employees are in agreement with implementing existing equality legislation. However, employers do not always pursue this point with rigor. Although it is possible to give a model answer at interview which may suggest a potential staff member is supportive of equality and diversity, colleges need to find ways to explore this issue in more depth in order to gain a greater

understanding of potential new staff members' commitment to equality. Colleges could use in-tray exercises which pose difficult and challenging scenarios and to ask candidates about their past experience to assist them in achieving this aim. In this regard, simple, one-dimensional answers are no longer useful, and candidates would need to be able to explore issues from a variety of perspectives, including that of minority groups. Managers, who may be used to expecting simple model answers, may also require further training so that they can accommodate the variety of different responses that such an approach may produce. Introducing or including exercises and questions of this nature may extend the interview process and could create delays in appointment, however, investing time in recruitment and training should pay dividends in terms of the type of employees recruited. Colleges should consider extending Ofsted's concept of limiting grades, to include employment procedures, and not appoint staff if they were to provide unsatisfactory answers which revealed attitudes which could not effectively be addressed through training.

To further support the aim of removing racism in colleges, existing staff should have their attitude towards and promotion of equal opportunities monitored through an appraisal/review process, which would consider information from a range of sources including student voice. This information could then be used to form an assessment of the employees' performance over the previous year. This concept has been recently adopted by Ofsted in its inspection procedures and 'three critical judgements' (Ofsted, 2009, p10), including equality and diversity now 'contribute to and may limit the grade for overall effectiveness' (ibid, p19) of an establishment. Where 'a judgement of inadequate is awarded for equality and diversity, it is unlikely that the overall effectiveness of the provider will be better than satisfactory' (ibid, p21). In a similar fashion, employees could be assessed on how effectively they had helped to promote 'social and educational inclusion' (ibid, p19) and those staff who failed to perform adequately would have the grade for their overall effectiveness limited and would be given targets to improve.

These actions may appear to be draconian, however according to Ofsted, equality and diversity in practice means:

- *actively promoting positive relationships and respect for human rights*
- *understanding and respecting differences*
- *taking positive actions to tackle unlawful discrimination, inequality and unfairness*
- *adopting practices that make best use of the differing skills and talents of individuals*

- *focussing on improving outcomes that raise standards and improve lives.*

ibid, pp19-20

This definition is wholly consistent with equality legislation (including the Race Relations Amendment Act, 2000: the Disability Discrimination Act, 2005; and the Equalities Act 2006) and LLUK's requirement that all tutors in the sector show commitment to '*equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to learners, the workforce, and the community*' and '*apply principles to evaluate and develop own practice in promoting equality and inclusive learning and engaging with diversity*' (LLUK, 2006, p3). Further it is also consistent with the IfL's (The Institute for Learning) draft Single Equality Strategy which 'aspires to go beyond the legal requirements relating to equality' (IfL, 2009, p3). Implementing good practice relating to equality and diversity is therefore not an additional burden on staff or an optional extra, as in the current framework working towards the eradication of racism is simply fulfilling the requirements of being a tutor in the sector.

Once members of staff have been appointed and are in post there needs to be ongoing staff training to ensure that staff comply with their contractual and legislative obligations. To achieve this colleges need to provide 'proper training on race equality' (DfES, 2006, p17), which recognises 'issues specific to sub-groups' (ibid, p19). While it appears that in most colleges 'teachers, managers and support staff ... benefited from some training in equality and diversity ... inspection reports suggest that there is insufficient training in about half of all colleges' (Ofsted, 2005[a], p21). It appears that this remains an area of development and for many colleges training could be usefully extended to include 'a compulsory induction module on equality and diversity, run termly to ensure that all new teaching staff participate early in their employment (with) regular planned activities to raise awareness and help staff plan their work to meet the college's equality objectives' (ibid, pp21-22). An initiative of this nature would help to support staff to work with diverse communities and could be co-ordinated by the IfL as part of the compulsory 30 hours continuing professional development all staff must complete. Such an approach would considerably help to promote the equality agenda within colleges. However, it also assumes that colleges have a defined equality agenda with objectives and targets for improvement, and it is possible not all colleges have developed their responses to effectively catering for diverse client groups to this level.

8.3.2 Developing a Supportive Institutional Culture

Developing a supportive institutional culture is intrinsically linked with staffing and having members of staff who are committed to promoting equality and diversity. This applies to staffing at all levels underpinned by a commitment from senior management to initiate and bring about institutional change. This change begins with formulating and promoting an equalities policy which caters for the needs of all current and future college clients. Worryingly as recently as 2002, 'six per cent of colleges nationally did not have an equal opportunities policy' (Commission for Black Staff in FE, 2002, p78). While it is highly unlikely that there are any colleges without an equalities policy in present times as under the new Ofsted inspection framework and with the introduction of limiting grades, this would have the effect of potentially identifying a provider as inadequate, the fact that some colleges have only developed such policies in recent years, means that these colleges have significant work to complete in relation to their understanding and enactment of equalities policies, principles and practice.

To a degree this issue was confirmed in a 2004-05 Ofsted survey, completed some two years after the publication of the report from the Commission for Black Staff in FE, which found that although colleges 'were broadly meeting their responsibilities under the legislation. ... too few were actively and systematically instigating change to improve race equality at the rate which might be expected ... particularly with regard to staffing and governance' (Ofsted, 2005[a], p1). This is a damning indictment by Ofsted and suggests a picture of widespread institutional complacency lacking the necessary direction and sense of urgency from college managers to promote and accelerate the agenda for equality. Indeed in the same report, Ofsted noted one of the most significant factors in bringing about change was 'the leadership of the principal and senior managers in establishing a college-wide ethos of equality and high aspirations for all' (ibid). Ofsted's findings appear to suggest that in too many colleges such leadership is underdeveloped or absent.

College staff at all levels from principals and teaching staff through to administrators and maintenance staff, as agents of the institution, have a key role to play in developing a supportive institutional culture. In my research, one of my key findings was that the Black students who participated in the study believed that the teaching staff they worked with valued them as individuals and were committed to creating an atmosphere 'where learners of diverse heritage felt welcome and safe' (Ofsted, 2005[a], p1). Tutors did not ignore difference

and were aware of and acknowledged the issues students' ethnicity might present in wider society. Within college, staff appeared to try to respect *all* students regardless of ethnicity, thus signalling to Black learners that they were valued and included members of the college community, afforded the same rights and responsibilities as any other college user. This again is consistent with the findings of Ofsted who noted that college students commented favourably on 'the good atmosphere of the institution' (Ofsted, 2005[a], p25). Although, the students in my study also reported positively on the supportive and helpful nature of staff in FE colleges and drew particular attention to the difference in staff attitudes' between college and school staff (see section *6.3 Relationships with Staff at FE Colleges*), it is important to note that the findings in these two particular colleges may not be typical of the FE sector and it would be ill-advised to make broad generalisations for the sector as a whole based on the findings of this inquiry.

While it appears that colleges have achieved a degree of success in generating an institutional culture which is more sympathetic to and supportive to the needs of Black students, this appears to be an organic outcome, rather than a planned and systematic development. This view is supported by the Ofsted findings of 2004-05 in which insufficient colleges were taking active steps to promote change. It appears in this respect colleges have an opportunity to begin to engage with a more proactive approach to advance positive race relations – the key to this may be to have a systematic approach to staff training as described in section *8.3.1 The Eradication of Racism.*

8.3.3   Provision of Relevant Support

Although 'colleges recognise that support for learners, both personal and academic, is an important aspect of the promotion of equality of opportunity', (Ofsted, 2005[a], p22), it is not readily apparent how colleges should work to meet learners' cultural and emotional needs. It is in this area, that colleges appear to have struggled to take the positive action encouraged by Ofsted to progress positive race relations. In essence, it appears that although the need for further action is appreciated by both Ofsted and the colleges themselves, there is a lack of clarity on what this additional action may be, and finding ways to meet and support learners' differing cultural needs remains an ongoing challenge for many colleges.

A potential mechanism which could help to develop a supportive institutional culture would be to provide an organised and systematic approach to capturing learner voice, so that the learners themselves informed colleges how best to support their needs, because as consumers

learners are ideally placed to 'find a creative solution'(2005, Hanman, p171) to persistent

issues . Most colleges have an active student union and/or a student council which works to

engage with the student population and to represent their views to college management.

However, many college student unions/councils adopt a homogenous approach to student

voice, viewing them as one collective body, and do not always recognise difference. It may

be more appropriate for FE colleges to consider the model adopted in many HEIs and to have

separate union officers which bring together 'group(s) of similarly situated people and give

them the time ... to talk through their everyday life, reflect on that and get ideas from each

other' (Morrison, 2008, p 17) so that they can begin to 'make positive changes' (ibid) to

systems and structures. In this way the distinct voices of different groups, such as mature

learners, women students, students with disabilities and Black students are captured,

preserved and represented.

While there is still an issue with this form of organisation, in that it appears to assume that the

needs of all Black, women, mature or disabled students are the same, at least it provides a

distinct vehicle for bringing the views of these different interest groups to the fore, and

accords with the observations raised in section *6.4.2 Peer Support* when the research

participants explained how helpful they found being with other Black peers was and how

being with others like them enabled them to articulate and formulate their views on learning

and other education issues. It appears Black males understand what they need to support

their learning and can identify ways to achieve success, however, they need support in

forming groups which can interface with college staff and managers to express these ideas.

Though there could be positive advantages in forming and recognising Black male support

groups, there may be inherent difficulties in achieving this aim. Would Black males be

willing to join such groups? Would they use them constructively to raise issues of concern?

Would they be representative of the college Black male population? Would colleges be

willing to support groups of this type? Who would co-ordinate the group? Could they

become an instrument of hegemonic control or could they be perceived as such? Although

these are reasonable questions to consider, in one sense they are not material for in neither of

the two colleges where I completed my research were groups of this kind in existence. In that

regard, although there could be considerable difficulties is setting up a group of this kind, the

success of a support group like this cannot be fairly evaluated if such a group does not

currently exist. Indeed if each college were to take the significant step of routinely

establishing a Black male support group, which could have direct dialogue with college staff

and management, this could be one action that could help colleges achieve their equality objectives and could potentially help to accelerate the rate at which race equality improved within an institution. Fundamentally, perhaps as educators we now need to start implementing the mantra that 'young people are part of the solution, not the problem' (Alexander and Potter, 2005, p198).

8.3.4 Staffing Issues

In addition to the staff recruitment and training issues described in section *8.3.1 The Eradication of Racism*, colleges also need to pay attention to their staffing profile. While not unequivocally confirming the need for Black mentors (see sections *6.4.1 Staff Support* and *6.4.2 Peer Support*), the students who participated in my inquiry *all* suggested that it would have been easier to form positive working relationships with Black tutors, believing that this would have been beneficial for their learning and overall experience of FE, and in common with Byfield's findings 'most would have welcomed' (2008, p81) such an opportunity because Black tutors 'helped ensure that practices (in the schools) were fair' and 'they were noted for giving Black students that extra push to maximise their potential' (ibid, p83). However, while it appears that the appointment of more Black staff to the sector would be a positive step to support the learning of Black students, the situation in the sector has been and remains less than encouraging.

Data from 2002 indicated that 'compared to White teaching staff, Black staff are under-represented at all levels. Moreover, half of all Black teaching staff (3.5%) appear(ed) to be concentrated in part-time posts' (Commission for Black Staff in FE, 2002, p36). Further, Avril Willis (then Director of Quality and Standards at the Learning and Skills Council) interviewed in 2002, stated that it was unacceptable that 'the only Black people (students) may encounter were auxiliary staff', prompting her to set a target 'to see 11 Black principals in the sector by 2009' (Black Staff Commission News, 2002, p2). However, reporting on progress different public sector organisations had made in achieving equality targets, the Commission for Racial Equality reported that 'whilst some organisations had set themselves time-related outcomes (i.e. 'goals') ... over half of respondents from the education sector had not identified outcomes' (Commission for Racial Equality, 2003, p6).

Although the findings of the Commission for Black Staff in FE relates to data collected in 2002, the situation regarding numbers of Black staff had not significantly improved by 2005 so that 'Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality ... warned that

colleges could have compliance orders placed on them to force them to recruit and promote more Black and ethnic-minority staff' (Clancy, 2005, TES online). Unlike the US though, UK legislation does not use a quota system in relation to employing numbers of Black people and while Trevor Phillips suggested that compliance orders *could* be used to encourage colleges to employ more Black staff, he also said in the same interview 'We don't want to do that do we? It would be much better if the sector wakes up and makes an effort' (ibid), returning the responsibility for bringing about change back to the colleges. It therefore appears that although there was, and appears to still be, general agreement between the Commission for Black Staff in FE, the Learning and Skills Council, the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality and Black students themselves that it would be helpful for colleges to employ more Black tutors, no one particular agency or individual appear to have had the will to enforce colleges to take more affirmative action.

Despite this lack of positive action and relatively weak or non-existent targets being set by some education organisations, there have been significant improvements in terms of employment. Although the overall figure of Black teaching staff employed in the sector has fallen from 7 per cent in 2002 to 6.5 per cent in 2005-06, by 2009 there were 11 Black and minority ethnic principals employed in the sector meeting 'the target set by the Learning and Skills Council in 2002' and 'each one (was) mentoring several senior staff from minority backgrounds supporting and encouraging them as they prepare(d) for principalship' (Thompson, 2009, TES online). This is a significant achievement and 'while 11 Black and ethnic minority principals does not sound much and is only 3 per cent of the total, it is more than there has ever been' (ibid). Further the mentoring arrangements that have been established provide a mechanism to increase the number of Black principals and managers in the future.

To conclude this section, although recognising the achievements that have been made, 'there is undoubtedly much more to be done' (Commission for Black Staff in FE, 2004, p2) to ensure that there is a greater representation of Black staff at all levels within colleges, and 'it is clear that a major focus for the future needs to be on encouraging and ensuring that organisations set themselves meaningful, time related outcomes' (Commission for Racial Equality, 2003, p11). Further there must be a 'commitment from the top if equality and diversity are to be effectively mainstreamed' (ibid, p12) and the ambition of having a more diverse and representative workforce is to be achieved.

8.3.5 Utilising Learner Agency

Finally, in this section on *Developments for Future Practice*, I would like to return to the Black males themselves. It would be easy to construct Black males as hapless victims of an oppressive regime with few or no choices on how they chose to interact and interface with the education system and staff within it. However, to present such a picture would fail to pay respect to the Black males themselves and while hooks claims that black males are 'groomed to be without choice' (hooks, 2004, p35) by the dominant hegemony, this may accord more power than appropriate to the education system itself. While not trying to minimise the significant structural inequalities that may exist within education, it would be inaccurate to claim that Black males are without any influence at all. Black males have choices and though some appear to believe that 'no matter how hard they work they would not rise up' (Datnow and Cooper, 2008, p191) in the education system and conform to being typecast as underachieving lost causes, there are those who realise that 'embracing the stereotype could be life-threatening' (hooks, 2004, p35) and instead choose to 'educate themselves within educational systems that (are) not supportive' (ibid) of their needs and to become 'actively engaged in the creation of their own academic success' (Datnow and Cooper, 2008, p206).

A critical factor in:

> *school achievement depends, most centrally, on identifying with school; that is forming a relationship between oneself and the domains of schooling such that one's self regard significantly depends on achievement in those domains.*

> Steele, 2008, p167

However, choosing to work within existing education systems, depends on the perception of the value of that system by Black males. While some Black men have worked tirelessly to 'acquire education on all levels' (hooks, 2004, p33), there are 'Black males who have given up on the system' (Majors and Billson, 1992 p7) and rejected mainstream education, choosing instead to value the virtues of operating outside and beyond conventional education systems, often as a way of expressing their masculinity and street credibility and mirroring Willis' 1977 research in which white working class youth 'resisted school and created their own standards for measuring success' (Datnow and Cooper, 2008, p191). For Black males to work within education systems requires that they value 'school achievement in the sense of its being a part of one's self-definition, a personal identity to which one is self-evaluatively

accountable' (Steele, 2008, p165). Further it is necessary for the Black males to believe that education and learning, rather than being instruments of oppression, can be useful mechanisms of liberation and advancement - in short it is necessary for Black males to believe that education is cool.

The likelihood of Black males being able to redefine cool 'to include academic success' (Datnow and Cooper, 2008, p205) appears to be linked to being able to maintain strong 'cultural identities while simultaneously recognising the importance of academic achievement' (ibid, 2008, p193) so that students can develop a distinctive persona which is 'neither oppositional nor conformist' (ibid) and enables them to 'develop academic identities without feeling as though they (are) diminishing their cultural identities' (ibid). This idea is further supported by Zepke, Leach and Butler who noted in their research that 'self-determination (was) enhanced where supportive social-contextual conditions exist to promote feelings of self efficacy' (2010, p4). If such systems and structures can be successfully established in colleges then Black males will be enabled to make positive choices regarding the way they navigate education and can escape Bourdieu's notion of habitus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by using their personal agency to promote a positive academic outcome (see section *6.5 Personal Motivation to Succeed*).

8.4 Potential Future Threats to Achieving Change

In the previous section, *8.3 Developments for Future Practice,* I have described opportunities that exist for helping to enhance the educational experience of Black males as they navigate their way through the FE sector. These suggestions include

- Eradicating racism;
- Developing a supportive institutional culture;
- Providing relevant support;
- Recruiting suitable staff members and providing appropriate training; and
- Supporting learners to utilise their personal agency in a positive fashion.

Each of these suggestions individually has the potential to make a difference to Black males as they move through the FE sector and collectively they present an opportunity to change the way that the FE sector responds to educating Black males. Regrettably, to date, few if any of these suggestions have been adopted in a systematic fashion either in the colleges where I completed my research or more widely across the sector, even though many of these

suggestions are relatively low cost ideas which would not involve significant capital investment.

However, to implement the changes I have suggested requires determination from all members of college staff, from Principals to Premises Officers, to question and confront existing structures and systems and to search for new ways of working. This is a significant challenge to achieving change and unless tutors, managers and others that work within the FE sector demonstrate the resolve needed to 'transform learning' (Alexander and Potter, 2005, p203) and herald a new era characterised by equality and fairness, opportunities to achieve wholesale change within the sector will not be realised. Further unless and until the primary argument of winning over hearts and minds is achieved for all staff members, any changes are likely to be superficial and short lived, promoted by a need to comply with external or internal directives rather than genuinely believing that new ways of working are needed.

Like all public sector organisations, colleges are obliged to function within a legislative framework and being publically funded are ultimately responsible to the government to promote and achieve key government objectives. Previously this has meant the Colleges were obliged to meet the requirements of the Race Relations (1976) and the Race Relations Amendment (2000) Acts and to publish statements on how they would work to promote positive Race Relations. The Equality Act 2010, which replaces all previous equality legislation, claims to 'bring together; harmonise and in some respects extend the current equality law' (Government Equalities Office, 2010, p4) and is intended to 'remove inconsistencies and make it easier for people to understand and comply with'(ibid, p3) legislation. The Equality Act, 2010 is intended 'to help tackle discrimination and inequality' (ibid) and is a central Government policy designed to support colleges to promote equality and challenge all forms of unfairness. However, the merging of separate, discrete Acts (including, among others, the Race Relations Acts, The Disability Discrimination Act and the Sex Discrimination Act), into a single Act, rather than strengthening equality legislation may have the effect of weakening responses to promoting race equality. Indeed as late as November 2010, as the Equalities Bill was being progressed through Parliament, Race on the Agenda (ROTA) 'one of Britain's leading social policy think-tanks focussing on issues that affect Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities' (ROTA, online) expressed its concerns that the Bill was 'not fit for purpose' and was uncertain how the Bill would support organisations to 'actually take action to promote equality' (ibid). Further they were concerned that 'in the absence of more prescriptive duties' and because the Act 'carries no

stipulation that public bodies set Equality Objectives for each protected characteristic' (ibid) some organisations may choose to not to identify the promotion of positive Race Relations as a priority. As such ROTA believed that the Equality Act, rather than strengthening equality legislation was 'a regression from the existing consultation duty under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000'(ibid) and rather than benefiting Black groups was actually a barrier to achieving positive change within colleges.

A further threat to implementing positive change to support the education of Black males in colleges, is the recently introduced increase to the participation age so that 'by 2015 all young people will continue in education or training to 18' (DCSF, 2009, p26). Although there are a variety of options available to 16-18 year olds, including sixth form colleges, apprenticeships and employment with accredited training, it is reasonable to predict that many of these young people (now obliged by law to remain within education or training) will continue their education in FE colleges. While this is not a direct attack on colleges, college staff or the Black males who attend colleges, this initiative has the potential to change the population of learners who attend college, moving it from an elective client group who have chosen to participate (see section *4.2 The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and FE Sectors*) to a part-conscript population. This initiative represents a significant change to the way that colleges recruit students and has the potential to have a profound impact on the culture of colleges, possibly making some of the features of college cultures that my research suggests Black males found so positive (see sections *4.2 The Organisational Arrangements and Institutional Cultures of Secondary and FE Sectors; 4.4 The Social Positioning of Black Males in Secondary Schools and FE* and *6.1 The Institutional Culture of FE Colleges*) an artefact of the past as colleges find ways to accommodate learners who have not chosen to remain in education.

Colleges are not islands. They are part of the wider community. They are not removed from, but operate within and are part of this same community, working with other industries and services to try and meet the needs of the different communities they serve. In this endeavour as colleges try to minimise the effect of possible future threats to achieving change, they may find it is these same networks and communities that will be part of a collective solution to meet the needs of Black males and other learners.

8.5 Chapter Summary

I have used this final chapter in my thesis to explore three main ideas. I have considered the transformative impact of this study on myself, the research participants and the wider research community; I have presented my emerging conclusions arising from my inquiry; and I have made suggestions on how the FE sector might respond so that it can better support the educational needs of Black males studying within the sector. While I believe my findings are significant and have had an effect on me and others, ultimately I acknowledge it is not within my gift to make this determination - in the final analysis this will be the decision of others.

FE remains a constantly evolving and dynamic environment that seeks to cater for a very diverse client group. In recent years further central government initiatives have been introduced including, for example, the continued expansion of foundation degrees and greater development of partnership work with employers. While such changes have been useful in helping to meet differing student needs and to improve learners' experience of college, these initiatives were not relevant to my inquiry, as they were introduced after I completed my research.

The education of Black males in the UK is a complicated situation, with many different and sometimes ostensibly confusing and contradictory features. What may appear to be a positive development for one community or a single individual may be less than satisfactory for another group. However, this is not to suggest that certain approaches or ideas are invalid or should not be tried or re-tried. Rather it serves to underline the complexity of the situation and further emphasises the situated nature of responses that may be required to help improve the educational journey of Black males in the FE sector. It also serves to highlight that it is extremely unlikely that a simple, quick-fix approach which would improve academic achievement and enhance the learning experience of Black males could be swiftly implemented and is readily available. Yet, it is incumbent on educational researchers and others committed to promoting change to continue to try and develop new and different ideas to difficult and intractable situations. Some of these ideas will not work. However, it would be a far greater failure to cease trying, rather than to try and not succeed. In spite of earlier setbacks and difficulties many Black students remain positive about education and return after past disappointments later to the FE sector to try and attain the academic qualifications they were not able to accomplish in the secondary sector, the least the education system can do to is to recognise and respond to this persistence and to try and support learners in their

efforts to achieve. Ultimately it is likely that in order for this to happen the education system will need to learn to work alongside and with Black learners to produce a new, more responsive education system.

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Appendix 1
Individual Interview Schedule

1. Where in college would you say your social space is? Why?

2. When you socialise in college who do you choose to associate with? Why? Is race or gender influential in the groups you choose to mix with?

3. As you move about college do you perceive you are treated differently in any way because of your ethnicity? If so how does this manifest itself? How does this make you feel?

4. Is there any difference between the treatment you experience from different staff groups - refectory, library, reception, academic etc?

5. Do you believe your race has any impact on the way staff treat/perceive you?

6. Have you ever experienced the curriculum to be hostile towards you – e.g. through omission or racist representation?

7. How welcoming do you feel the physical environment of the college is to Black males?

8. What internal support mechanisms are available to you in college?

9. Have any other support mechanisms (e.g. church, family) been important to you during your time at college?

10. How do you feel the college demonstrates it values you?

Appendix 2

Focus Group Prompts to Facilitate Discussion

Participants were given a series of grids and envelopes containing possible descriptions of the feature they were asked to discuss. Participants had to agree which descriptions they would use. They were free to add new descriptions if they felt the choices they had been given were inadequate. Participants were free to complete the grids in any order they chose.

Grid 1: I would describe college as ...

- Boring
- Dull
- Too strict
- Cold and damp
- Stupid
- A waste of time
- Weird
- Not complicated
- Friendly
- Happy
- Interesting
- Laid back
- Warm
- A good laugh
- Shit
- Better than a crap job

Grid 2: The atmosphere in college is ...

- Boring
- Dull
- Too strict
- Crap
- Stupid
- Harsh

- Hostile
- Shit
- Friendly
- Easy-going
- Interesting
- Laid back
- Warm
- Good
- Happy

Grid 3: The best/worst thing about college is ...

- My mates
- The canteen
- Being able to smoke
- The lessons
- Rules
- Getting a grant
- Late finishes
- Girls
- The teachers
- The library
- Wearing what I like
- The way I'm treated
- Free lessons
- Choosing what I study
- Early finishes

Grid 4: The attitudes of students towards each other is ...

- Friendly
- Caring
- Considerate
- Open

- Honest
- Sound
- Helpful
- Mean
- Angry
- Snidey
- Bitchy
- Snobby
- Stuck-up

Grid 5: The behaviour of students towards each other is ...

- Fresh
- Friendly
- Arrogant
- Easy-going
- Stupid
- Supportive
- Bad
- Aggressive
- Not complicated
- Laid back
- Cocky
- Good
- OK

Grid 6: Staff at college ...

- Have it in for me and my mates
- Have their favourites
- Praise me if I do well
- Pick me if I volunteer
- Care about me
- Overlook me to answer questions

- Ask before judging
- Try their best to be fair
- Speak to me aggressively
- Prefer the girls
- Speak to me like an adult
- Listen to my side
- Reprimand me more harshly than others
- Jump to conclusions
- Give me a chance to join in
- Have high expectations of me
- Blame me first
- Take an interest in me
- Give me a chance
- Have low expectations of me
- Believe in my abilities
- Couldn't care less about me

Grid 7: The college curriculum is ...

- Relevant
- Meaningful
- Good
- Stimulating
- Interesting
- Varied
- Stupid
- Pointless
- Dull
- Boring
- Meaningless
- Too samey

Appendix 3

A Selection of Photographs Taken by the Research Participants

To preserve participant and institution anonymity only photographs which do not have people or clearly recognisable buildings and structures have been selected.