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## The Experiences of Black and Hispanic Males Retained Through Florida's Mandatory Third Grade Retention Law

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The Experiences of Black and Hispanic Males Retained Through Florida's Mandatory Third  
Grade Retention Law

by

Sophia McMorris

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
with a concentration in Elementary Education  
Department of Teaching and Learning  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the students who struggle academically and are left to feel like a failure...you are not. You matter. Your determination to show up and push through even when the odds are stacked against you makes you a success story. Keep showing up and keep putting your best foot forward. You are a winner. Don't give up, don't give in, remember, you were born to win.

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Thanks to my participants who trusted me with their truth, with the hope that I will shine light on what they experienced with the hope that change will one day come. You are stronger than you think. At your age, you have overcome what many can only imagine. You are my heroes.

To my dear friends who stood by me through this journey, I thank you. Stephanie, you are an amazing human being with the biggest heart. Thank you for being there for me every step of the way. Jennifer and Olwyn, you have been my rock. Thank you for being my writing buddies. I thank you for your continued support.

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## **ABSTRACT**

There has been a constant argument that if students cannot read by third grad, then they will have an uphill struggle for the rest of their educational journey. Researchers have provided evidence signaling some truth to this claim and efforts have been established to ensure that all students receive high-quality instruction (Tweed, 2001). Many states have struggled with policies on how to correct this problem, and they have been challenged to answer whether students who cannot read proficiently by the third grade should be promoted, or if they should be pertained and provided with intensive interventions before moving on to the next grade level. Unfortunately, many policies that have been implemented favorably responded yes to the second question and so retention remains dominant even though research has proven repeatedly that it is not effective (Greene & Winters, 2006). Thus, from a student's perspective, it is essential to understand the implications are of such policies. This qualitative multiple case study aims to elevate students' voices and perspective by addressing the question: How do Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience about retention.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

It has always been a constant battle “to fix” the American public-school system. In April of 1983, the Reagan Administration published a report, “A Nation at Risk,” outlining the erosion of the America’s education system by the rise of mediocrity that threatened the future of Americans (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The education system had lost sight of its purpose, of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed for the attainment of excellence (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The Reagan Administration believed that the education system was broken for several reasons. First, Americans’ standardized tests results were poorer than their international peers. Second, achievement on state standardized tests were the lowest in a quarter of a century. Third, performance on the national Scholastic Aptitude Test (more commonly referred to as SATs) declined from 1963 through 1980, and perhaps of most importance, many illiteracy rates were alarming. About 23 million American adults were considered functionally illiterate and about 13% of all 17-year-olds were considered illiterate (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Thus, the Reagan Administration laid out plans to combat this problem.

Two possible, but conflicting, solutions emerged: retention and social promotion. Retention means holding a student back in the same grade when they fail to meet academic expectations, or they fail to demonstrate that they have the needed academic proficiency to be promoted to the next grade level (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2019). Social promotion

means promoting a student to the next grade level with their peers, even though the student has not met the academic requirements or met performance standards at key grades (Doherty, 2004). However, the implementation of social promotion was highly criticized (Chen, 2019). According to Jennings (1999), social promotion has a negative effect on student achievement, and it assures failure by not making sure that students are prepared.

In the 1990s, President Clinton led the charge to end social promotion (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). President Clinton encouraged all states to require testing as the gatekeeper for promotion to the next grade level (Cannon, 1996; Huddleston, 2014). Thus, the practice of retention was born. Retention advocates argue that students should acquire basic knowledge at each grade level before being promoted (West, 2012). They argue that retention gives students an extra year of instruction to be successful at future levels (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Duggan, 2014; Wu et al., 2010). A Florida study showed that after two years, students retained under Florida's test-based promotion policy were able to outperform students who were promoted, by substantial amounts in both math and reading (West, 2012).

Clinton's gatekeeping strategy created a steady climb in retention. The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (1990) reported that by 9<sup>th</sup> grade, more than 15% of all students in the United States had been retained. In the early 2000s, retention was exacerbated with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Students who did not achieve the necessary benchmark needed to show the mastering of basic reading skills on state standardized tests by third grade were being retained (West, 2012). Thus, a test-based promotion policy was adopted by all 50 states.

Florida has wholeheartedly embraced retention as an effective academic strategy. In 2002, Florida passed a law that mandated all third graders to be retained if they did not get level

2 or above on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), in reading (Peterson, 2006; West, 2012). Students who were retained would be given intensive remediation to improve their reading skills. This policy focused strictly on reading which made it different from earlier policies that were implemented (West, 2012).

Under this law, students may be exempt from retention if they meet certain criteria known as “the good cause exemption.” These good causes include: students with disabilities whose Individualized Education Plan indicates that the state test is an inappropriate measure of their performance; students with disabilities who were previously retained in third grade; Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students with less than two years of instruction in English; students who were retained twice previously; students scoring above the 51<sup>st</sup> percentile nationally on another standardized reading test; and students demonstrating proficiency through portfolio of work (Florida Department of Education, 2018; West, 2012).

Florida’s implementation of this retention policy saw a rapid increase in the number of third grade retentions (Alexander, 2003; Florida Department of Education, 2014; West, 2012). When the policy went into effect in 2003, the number of Florida third graders retained increased from 4,819 students (2.8%) to 21,799 (13.5%), an increase of 10.7% from the previous year (Florida Department of Education, 2014). Florida’s retention pattern mirrored the national patterns, as the students retained under Florida’s test-based promotion policy were disproportionately Black and Hispanic (West, 2012). Several other researchers argued that black students represented only 22% of Florida third graders between 2003 and 2008 but 40 % of Black students were retained. Hispanics accounted for 24 % of all third graders in Florida but 29% of them were retained (Hwang, Cappella & Schwartz, 2016; West, 2012).

Several states implemented policies to help students who were retained, however, Florida's policy stood out from many other states (West, 2012). The policy laid out steps that should be followed to ensure that students who were retained get the reading skills needed to be promoted the following year. According to the Florida Department of Education (2016), retained students must be given the opportunity to participate in their district's summer reading program, with the schools developing an academic improvement plan for each retained student; all retained students must be assigned to teachers who earn the rating "highly effective", and the teacher must have a reading endorsement on their certificate prior to receiving a student who has been retained. Retained students must also receive 90 uninterrupted minutes daily of research-based reading instruction as an intervention strategy.

Studies about the effect of Florida's retention laws have been mixed. One longitudinal study, Schwerdt and West (2012) followed, observed, and collected data over a six-year period (2003-2009). The study found that comparing retained students to promoted students at a different grade level would conflate the effects of retention a year later. The study concluded that students showed improvement in the third grade and this improvement could be inflated due their prior exposure to the same content two years in a row. They stated that the achievement that the students gained, later diminished. The researchers did not believe that the students retained in third grade due to Florida's mandatory policy benefitted (Schwerdt & West, 2012). Other studies have shown that students who were retained in the third grade showed growth, and outperformed their promoted peers (Lorence, 2016).

Given the mixed results, opponents declare that this policy and the Florida State Assessment (FSA) test should be eliminated. They argue that the policy and test do more harm than good to students. Opponents have made progress as parents in Florida can opt out of the

FSA (Schwerdt & West, 2012). On the other hand, proponents of retention say that the Florida's mandatory retention law has created long-needed change in the education system. They believe that the policy is effective. They contend that students who are retained have shown growth and continue to excel (Greene & Winter, 2006).

The battle about retention is not only in Florida. For decades, the public has been divided about such policy nationally. Proponents have fought to implement policies for retention (Lorence, 2006). Other studies indicate a positive influence of students' achievement overtime (Lorence, 2012). Some studies show that the students benefit from retention and most exceed their peers (Xia & Kirby, 2009). These studies argue that allowing students the extra year they needed is academically sound and does more good than harm (Hartke, 1999; Lorence, 2016; Thompson & Cunningham, 2006).

Opponents have fought to erase retention policies, stating the danger it poses on the lives of students (Lorence, 2006). Any academic gains students make from retention are short-lived; in general students do not benefit academically from retention (Xia & Kirby, 2009). Studies have also shown that retention influences students emotionally and leads to low self-esteem (Xia & Kirby, 2009). This low self-esteem progresses over time and these students often become aggressive, drop out of school, break the law and one out of four times become incarcerated (Alexander, 2003; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Jimerson, 2001). In addition, retained students are more likely to have behavioral problems because of their age differences with newly promoted students (Xia & Glennie, 2005; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Retention also puts a financial burden on an already overtaxed and under-resourced education system; extra money must be spent to keep students in the school system longer than they should (Xia & Glennie, 2005; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Studies consistently show that, in comparison to low performing promoted

students, students who were retained in elementary grades showed lower levels of growth, over a longer period (Bright, 2011; Duggan, 2014). Studies argue that because of retention in the elementary school, these students eventually dropped out of high school (Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Thus, some believe that the influence of retention overtime is far more damaging and should be avoided at all costs (Hughes, West, Kim, & Bauer, 2018).

Data about retained students is troubling. At present, the most comprehensive information on retention comes from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Their report (2017) examined retention from 1994-2017. In 2017, the total number of students retained in the United States was 1,082,000. More males were retained (n=608,000) than female (n=474,000). The NCES data confirmed that retention rates were highest among traditionally disadvantaged Black and Hispanic students, who are most likely to suffer from low academic performance (NCES, 2017). The respective percentage for Black and Hispanic students were 3.1 percent and 2.9 percent as compared with 2.1 percent for white students (NCES, 2017). These alarming statistics coupled with the contradictive research findings indicate a need for further investigation into the effects of retention on children. Research has explored “Retention Issues,” which includes but not limited to, “Who Repeats a Grade”. “Retention and Standardized Test;” and “Emotional Development” (Karweit, 1999). However, there are few studies that focus on the experiences of students who have been retained.

Many researchers have also argued that retention occurs because of the Inequities in Education and Social Justice (West, 2014). According to Freire (1970) schools are not politically neutral. Milner (2010) echoed this same sentiment declaring there is no equity in educational practices and opportunities. Milner (2010) also argued that schools can structurally



produce and perpetuate inequity, poverty, and cultures of apathy while pretending to be designed to do the opposite. There are many factors that rationalize inequalities (Sleeter, 2008). These include but not limited to lack of resources, teacher competency, diversity of teachers in the classroom and low teacher expectation (especially for students of color) (Sleeter, 2008).

These inequalities are evident when one looks at the retention rate in schools (Payne, 2008). It has been discovered that most Title 1 schools (a school that supports low-income students throughout the nation) in the USA are espoused to flawed educational system (Dreeban & Gamoran, 2000). This flawed education system has caused more students of color and Hispanic students to be retained at a higher rate than their white peers (Jamieson, 2016). These flawed educational experiences include low teacher expectations, ability grouping and data tracking (Dreeban & Gamoran, 2000). Opponents for retention also argue that one of the major flaws in the education system is “Standardized Testing” (West, 2012). A standardized test is any examination that is administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner (Educational Leadership, 1999). To be promoted Florida, all third-grade students must pass the ELA FSA (District of Education, 2020).

West (2019) argues that children of color, especially those from low-income families, have suffered the most because of these high stakes standardized testing in Florida. He further stated that these standardized testing in public education have undermined equity and school quality (West, 2019). According to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (2020), African American boys are placed, or misplaced, in special education in disproportionate numbers, based on test results, and that these programs are often to blame for failing to fully educate them. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (2020) also stated that African American and Hispanic males are more likely to be held back because of low test scores.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2021) standardized testing should not be embraced or used as a tool to measure students' success until all students have had access to high-quality content that fits their educational needs. They also believe that all students, regardless of the color of their skins or their background should have highly qualified teachers who are prepared to meet their needs (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2021).

Howard & Aleman (2008) strongly believes that teachers can alleviate inequities by working for social justice, which gives “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shape to meet their needs” (Bell, 2007). If social justice is embraced within the education system, then the ratio of Blacks and Hispanic males being retained would be equal to their white peers (Jimerson, 2019). According to Giroux (2009) social justice calls for change, equal rights, opportunities for all and a reexamination of societal power structures to attain equity in education.

Anderson (2018) a strong opponent of retention believes that if teachers are prepared to work with students from diverse background, then there would be no need for retention. He argues that all teachers in the classroom should understand inequities at both classroom and societal level (Anderson, 2018). Smith (2018) concluded that social justice in education is both a political and a learning problem. He further argues that because education is political it has disrupted the function of the school system and therefore embraced practices such as retention (Smith, 2018). Mills School of Education (2021) says it best,

Simply put, social justice in education refers to a commitment to challenging social, cultural, and economic inequalities imposed on individual arising from any differentiated distribution of power, resources and privilege.

West (2019) believes that retention can and will be eliminated when “educational leaders trained in social justice embrace diversity, and, in doing so, engage marginalized students and dismantle the outmoded structures of education that serve to perpetuate, not redress, inequality” (p.1).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Even though retention is a controversial educational practice (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 1994), Florida has wholeheartedly embraced the implementation of retention (Florida Department of Education, 2019). In the 2017-2018 school year approximately 43,000 students in Florida received a level 1 on the FSA English/Language Arts test (Florida Department of Education, 2018). According to Florida’s mandatory retention law, these students will not be promoted if they receive a level 1. Students are only promoted through the discretion of individuals unknown to them who viewed a portfolio prepared for them by their class teacher. Each year since 2003, Florida has retained at least 12,200 third graders with more than 15,500 retained in seven of those years (West, 2014). Florida Department of Education (2019) data show a consistent growth of above 10% yearly of Florida’s students who are retained; with most of these students being retained in the third grade. As more students are retained in Florida, it becomes imperative to understand how much policies are influencing students’ lives from their perspective. Thus, this study aims to explore the experiences of children retained through Florida’s mandatory third grade retention law. The purpose is to understand how third grade retention policies in Florida’s mandatory retention law have influenced students’ lives and lived experiences. I will attempt to tell their stories through multiple case study using narrative inquiry to answer the research questions.

## **Significance**

This study will be significant as it will focus on the experiences of students who have been retained through Florida's mandatory retention law. Since retention is a universal problem affecting students' academic success, results may also be used to address this problem and re-examine its effect on the students' academic achievement.

It is anticipated that results from this study may assist policy makers in the education system in determining ways to identify and assist students who have been retained. Research shows that logical and theoretical arguments have been made for both positive and negative effect of retention on students. Finding information about their experiences because of retention through Florida's mandatory retention law, may add some needed information as it relates to the retention policy.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study relies heavily on critical race theory since this multiple case study is bounded by race and gender. Solórzano (2020) defines critical race theory as an attempt on behalf of some schools to develop an explanatory framework to account for the role of race and racism in education. Solórzano (2020) states these scholars work towards identifying and challenging any forms of subordination. Rollock and Gillborn (2011) define critical race theory as an approach to understand and challenge racial inequality in society, through a radical lens. Ladson-Billings (1998) states that critical race theory begins from the position that that racism is normal in American society.

Derrick Bell is considered the "Father of Critical Race Theory" because of his prolific writing on the topic (Ladson-Billings, 2013). According to Crenshaw (2010), Bell's scholarship served as a foundation for the establishment of critical race theory as a discourse on race and

inequality in the law. Crenshaw (2010) states that ‘Bell’s entire body of work encouraged an emerging cohort of critical thinkers to place race at the center of scholarly inquiry.’ Gloria Ladson-Billings, who is often referred to as the “Mother of the field of Critical Race Theory in Education,” embraces the work of Derrick Bell. Her substantial work is evident in the field of education. Adopting Bell’s work, she has drawn on counter storytelling as a method to make important claims about race and education (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which a unanimous decision decided that racial segregation of children in public schools was - unconstitutional (United States Court, 1955). According to Ladson-Billings (1998) one of the civil rights legal battles is “equal opportunity” in schools. She believes that all students of color should have access to the same opportunities of curriculum, instruction, funding, and facilities as White students (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Since this study examines the lived experience of Blacks and Hispanics that have been retained because of the mandatory Florida retention law, CRT can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequality that these students experience (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

For this research, I used Ladson-Billings (2013) modified version of the tenets since Ladson-Billings tenets focused on race and the education system. There are five tenets of critical race theory. According to Ladson-Billings (2013) the first tenet of critical race theory is the notion that racism is not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly, however, she argues that racism is the normal order of things in US society. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) stated that critical race theorists believe that racism is the usual way society does business and this is the everyday experience of many blacks in America. Bell (1992) believes that racism is a permanent fixture of American life, and it is important that one unmask and expose racism in its

various permutations. The second tenet is interest convergence. Bell (1980) believes that racial justice is only of interest to white people when there is a benefit to them. For white people, interest convergence is not about altruism, but alignment (Ladson-Billing, 2013).

Race as a social construction is seen as the third tenet. According to Ladson-Billings (2013) all the specialists (biologists, geneticists, anthropologists, and sociologists) agree there is no scientific backing for race, as it is not a scientific reality but that “humans have constructed social categories and organization that rely heavily on arbitrary genetic differences like skin color, hair texture eye shape, and lip size” (p. 38). While critical race theorists understand that there is no scientific backing for race, they also accept that in society, significant disparities are manifested based upon the categorical understanding of race (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The fourth tenet is intersectionality and anti-essentialism. Intersectionality is defined “as the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 51). Since there is a plethora of different ways that identities are acted out, one can never be sure which of those identities are the ones that will elicit a response from others, and because race has always been such a flashpoint in America, many believe that their challenges are a result from racial injustice alone (Ladson-Billings, 2013). The belief that all people are perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same is called essentialism, and it is the other side of intersectionality (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Critical race theorists decry essentialism. They also stay away from applying essentialism to the perspectives and experiences of racial groups (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The final tenet is voice or counter narrative. According to Ladson-Billings (2013), storytelling is one of the oldest human art forms, and her research shows that in law and

litigation, it is highly formalized. This means that the stories of ordinary people do not get told. Ladson-Billings (2013) believes that stories emphasize the perspective of the audience, teller, and society as well as those in power. and underscore with the teller, audience, society, and those who are in power. Critical race theorists, however, use storytelling to emphasize broad legal principles in relation to race and social injustice (Ladson-Billings, 2013). It was made clear that critical race theorists do not use storytelling to vent, or rant, or be an exhibitionist regarding one's own racial struggle (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Stories are important as they provide the context to understand, interpret and feel a situation properly (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

In the school system, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school funding are extremely important. For this research I will show the relation between critical theory and education. Critical race theory is a big component of this paper's research as critical race theorists view official school curricula as an outdated program that is culture specific, designed to maintain the system of White supremacy, and Ladson-Billings (1998) maintains this means that the stories of people of color, mainly African Americans and Hispanics, are often muted and made obsolete when they challenge the White supremacist master script.

When it comes to instruction, critical race theorists believe that the "current instructional strategies presume that African American students are deficient" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19). Critical race theorists further argue that instruction is viewed as being as a standard set of teaching skills that satisfies all students; if a student fails to achieve the required results, then the fault lies with the student and not the instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1998). For critical race theorists, intelligence tests were a tool used to legitimize the deficiency of African American students under the façade of scientific fact and rationalism" (Gould, 1981). According to critical

race theorists, assessment only measure what students do not know rather than what they do know (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Finally, critical race theorists have concluded that “no area of schooling underscores inequity and racism better than school funding” and that “inequality in school funding is a function of institutional and structural racism” (Ladson-Billing, 1998, p. 62). Ladson-Billing (1998) stated the following:

CRT takes to task school reformers who fail to recognize that property is a powerful determination of academic advantage. Without a commitment to redesign funding formulas one of the basic inequalities of schooling will remain in place and virtually guarantee reproduction of the status quo (p. 21).

Critical race theory requires that every attempt is made to expose the racism within education and to propose a viable solution to eradicate it.

In the education system, Critical Race Theory is a powerful element as it provides researchers with an angle not offered by many of the other theoretical frameworks (Huber, 2020). CRT is extended to include Hispanic/Latino populations; Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). LatCrit theorists aim to aims to address Latina/o identities and situations, as it does for African Americans (Valdes, 2015).

As a researcher I choose not to use LatCrit as a part of my theoretical framework. CRT allows the opportunity to examine how multiple forms of oppression can intersect within the lives of People of Color which include the Latina/o community. since the participants were not Spanish speaking, as such, language was not seen as a contributing factor to retention. Huber (2020) states that "CRT draws from multiple disciplines to challenge dominant ideologies such as meritocracy and colorblindness, which suggest educational institutions are neutral systems



that function in the same ways for all students” (p. 78). CRT challenges these beliefs. My research topic focuses on the lived experience of Black and Hispanic males, retained because of Florida’s retention law. Using CRT as the framework that guides my work it is my intention to bring to light the unique form of oppressions that the Black and Hispanic males encounter within our educational system (Ladson-Billing, 1998).

### **Researcher Positionality**

According to Scharp and Thomas (2019) it is important that researchers assess how their position might contribute to the interpretations of people lived experiences. I am a Black educator. I have been teaching in elementary school for twenty-seven years. Most of those years, I have been privileged to teach in the third grade. I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to be a part of decisions making as it relates to retention. Majority of those students were Black or Hispanic males.

It is likely, however, that as a Black educator, and an individual who fights for equity in the school system for Black and Hispanic students, my positionality influenced this project to some extent. In an effort to minimize biases or assumptions, I journaled daily. This journal allowed me to carry out analytical self-evaluation as it relates to my research. It also helps me to understand how my position as a Black educator and researcher affected the research process.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions apply to terms as they are used in this study.

1. *Early Grade Retention* – common practice used when students fail to meet required benchmarks, a policy of repetition, or giving students an additional year to repeat a grade to go over the same academic content, often taught the same way, that they failed to master the previous year (Riley, 1998).

2. *Florida State Assessment (FSA)* – is a suite of reading, writing and math tests designed to measure student performance. The test is tied to Florida’s Common Core-based standards, which outline what students should know at the end of each grade (Florida Department of Education, n.d.).

3. *Grade 3 Reading FSA* – the assessment, given in grade 3, used to measure student success on the Florida Sunshine State Standards in reading. Florida law [section 1008.25(5), Florida Statutes (F.S.)] says that third graders who do not have a score of Level 2 or above on the statewide Florida Standards Assessment-English Language Arts (FSA-ELA) must be retained (not promoted to grade 4) (Florida Department of Education, 2020).

4. *Good Cause Exemption* – when a third-grade student in Florida fails the FSA, or opts out of the FSA, they will need a Good Cause Exemption to be promoted to the fourth grade. The Good Cause Exemption allows students who demonstrate proficient reading levels through approved alternate tests, or through a student portfolio, to be promoted to the fourth grade. Good Cause Exemptions can also be given to students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, and those students who have already been retained twice; they are able to be promoted, despite not having met the required reading level (Florida Department of Education, 2020).

5. *High Stakes Assessment* – the process of making important decisions pertaining to a student’s academic career based off of test outcomes. These decisions include promotion status or the granting of a high school diploma (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

6. *Proficiency* – scoring a level 3 or higher on the Grade 3 and Grade 10 Reading FSA (Florida Department of Education, 2020).

7. *Social Promotion* - the practice of promoting students along with peers regardless of whether the academic requirements or performance standards have been satisfied. This practice is often carried out because it is viewed as being in the best interest of the student's social and psychological well-being. It is called "social" promotion because it is often carried out in the perceived interest of a student's social and psychological well-being (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A Review of The Related Literature**

This chapter includes a review of literature related to retention. The literature review examined literature published between 2000-2020. The review of the 64 studies indicated that retention is associated with demographics, gender, low socioeconomic, academic achievement, high school dropout rate, social economic outcomes, policies, and the economy. It examines the history of retention in public school and the influence of retention overtime. In this chapter, I summarized the main findings of the research study, including the strength of evidence for each theme that was discovered. In the conclusion I provided general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.

### **Characteristics of Retained Students**

#### **Demographics and Low Socioeconomic**

There were 27 empirical studies that consisted of information about the characteristics of retained students. The studies reviewed were consistent and studies discovered that retained students are more likely to be male, Black, and Hispanic students from low socioeconomic background (Blair, 2001; Hauser, Pager & Simmons, 2000; Hong & Yu, 2007; Lorence et.al. 2002). Holmes (1989) is noted to be one of the first researcher to write a meta-analysis and his work was one of the most cited works of the research retrieved for this study as it relates to the characteristics of retained students. The studies examined cited Holmes (1989), who concluded that there the likelihood was higher of Black and Hispanic male students being retained in comparison to white male students.

Research shows that many students from poor and minority families are at risk because some schools practice sorting paradigms. This means that when some students receive high-expectations instruction while others are relegated to lower quality education, will more than likely have lower quality futures (Karweit, 2000). According to Karweit (2000) the race/ethnicity of a student impacts the risk of retention. Karweit (2000) discovered that Black and Hispanic males who attend high poverty schools appear to be more likely to be retained by the third grade. The following summed up his study.

While Blacks make up about 20 percent of the population surveyed of retained students, they make up 32 percent of the retained population. Hispanics are represented in the retained population to about the same extent as they are in total population while Whites are under-represented in the retained population (Karweit, 1999, p. 25).

Gender and retention were also dominant throughout literature. In a cross tabulation of a study carried out by Karweit (1999) the following was brought to light.

In the sample of 8,695 students, data show that 625 girls are retained and 3,613 are promoted. For the young boys 979 are retained and 3,478 are promoted. The odds of being retained for boys was 0.28 in comparison to girls 0.17. The boys were therefore 1.64 times as likely to be retained as are the girls (p. 27)

Literature relating to retention also shows that for every 3 Black and Hispanic males that are retained, there is one Black and Hispanic female that is retained (West, 2012). There were eight studies that concluded that boys were more likely to be retained than girls.

Jimerson's (2001) meta-analysis was cited by several researchers who concluded that students from low socioeconomic were ten times more likely to be retained. There were five empirical research studies that arrived at that conclusion and three studies concluded that most of

the students who are retained are from single family households. Four empirical studies concluded that parents of lower socioeconomic status did not value education and four studies concluded that parents of students' who were retained were less involved in school in comparison to parents of kids who were promoted. The three studies that were conducted outside of the United States (China, Korea, and Canada) concluded that retained students were mostly boys of lower socioeconomic status.

Several empirical studies concluded that disadvantaged (low socioeconomic) students are less likely to have access to schools with sufficient resource, or qualified teachers, and so, in contrast to their white counterparts, are more likely to be retained (Honover Researcher, 2016; Hipkins, 2014; Schimke, 2012; Squires, 2015). Retention has even come to be viewed as a punishing disadvantage to those who are from a low socioeconomic background (Honover Researcher, 2016; Hipkins, 2014; Schimke, 2012; Squires, 2015).

### **The Effect of Retention Overtime**

Retention has always been a controversial issue in Education (Peixoto et al., 2016). There are some research studies that point to the benefits of retention (Lorence, 2012; West, 2014) while other findings show that holding students back for a year can bring about negative effect overtime (Jimerson, 2001; Wu et al., 2008). Findings show that the effect of retention overtime impact academic achievement, high school dropout rate, students' social-emotional outcome, policy, and the economy. This section discusses the above findings in detail.

#### **Academic Achievement**

Effects of grade retention over time were dominant throughout the literature retrieved and reviewed for this literature review. One of the effects was on academic achievement. Overall, most of the 32 research studies show that retention by itself is ineffective in increasing

or raising student achievement. Some studies that showed positive or mixed findings concluded that the growth is short lived (Lorence, 2006; Cham et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2018; Winters, 2012). According to one text and six empirical studies, retained students who made gains during the retention year did not have a large growth to bring them up to the same level as the students who were promoted (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 2003; Anderson & Dalton, 2002; Jimerson et al., 2002; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Schwerdt & West, 2012). These researchers also concluded that this growth was short lived, and this was evident in the following year. Four empirical studies concluded that retention showed no harm or benefits to students and four studies showed mixed findings stating that research done is inconclusive (Gleason, Kust & Hughes, 2007; Holmes & Saturday, 2000; Jimerson et al., 2005; Silberglitt, Appleton, et al., 2005). Two longitudinal studies that followed students for six years concluded that retention was ineffective as it relates to academic achievement (Jimerson & Carlson, 2005; Lorence, et al. 2002). The three studies that were conducted outside of the United States, also concluded that retention was ineffective when it comes to academic achievement (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 2003; Jacob & Legfron, 2002; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004).

Findings on the research of outcomes of retention as it relates to academic achievement vary depending on the researcher. Holmes (1989) and Jimerson (2001) were strong opponents of retention. The researchers reviewed in this paper who cited their work, always concluded that retention on academic achievement was ineffective. Alexander et al. (2003) contend that educational researchers have such strong negative opinions about grade retention that they are biased against any evidence which contradicts the view that holding students back a year in grade is a bad practice. Partial support for this view is evident in the kinds of criticisms made against studies that favor retention (Lorence, 2006). Lorence (2002) is a strong proponent for

retention and his studies have become seminal studies that have been cited by many researchers reviewed in this paper. Researchers reviewed for this paper who cited his work often concluded that retention is effective, and students show academic growth. Lorence (2006) stated that there is no overwhelming body of scientifically sound evidence demonstrating that making academically challenged students repeat a grade is ineffective or harmful. Lorence (2006) also did a meta-analysis study where he looked closely at Holmes (1989) and Jamison (2001) and other researchers meta-analysis studies and concluded that Holmes and Jamison had misinterpreted their data and findings from all analysis that he did show that retention is effective.

### **Students' High School Dropout Rate**

Those who oppose grade retention policies usually cite the high rate of dropping out of high school among students who have been retained. Results from this literature review concluded that the effect of elementary school retention on high school dropout rates have mixed findings. Seven empirical studies showed that students who were retained in one or more grades had a higher percentage rate of dropping out of high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Allensworth, 2005; Eddie & Showalter, 2001; Guevemont, Roos, & Brownell, 2007; Jimerson, Ferguson et al., 2002; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Lorence & Dworkin, 2004). Three empirical studies concluded that retaining students in elementary school reduced their odds to complete high school by about 55% (Bonvin, Bless & Schuepbach, 2008; Jacob & Lars, 2007; Jimerson, Anderson & Whipple, 2002). Three other studies concluded that retention was the highest predictor of dropping out of high school when compared to academic achievement and economic problems (Jimerson, Anderson & Whipple, 2002; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2008).



In contrast four empirical studies have concluded that retention does not affect the likelihood that students will drop out of school (Hughes, Cao, West, Allee & Cerda, 2017; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Lorence & Dworkin, 2004; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006). Four other studies concluded that retention is not associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school (Hughes, Cao, West, Allee & Cerda, 2017; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Lorence & Dworkin, 2004; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006). The two longitudinal studies concluded that they see no link to retention from elementary school and dropping out of high school (Anderson & Whipple, 2002; Jacob & Lars, 2007). The studies that were conducted outside of the United States also did not see a relationship with retention in the elementary school with dropping out of high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Jacob & Legfran, 2002; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). Lorence and Dworkin's (2006) research argued strongly against opponents of retention who stated that retention in elementary school is associated with high school dropout.

A detailed examination of retention studies pertaining to high school dropout rate indicates there is no cumulative research that yields a firm conclusion on the topic.

Instead of lauding research which supports a specific view and criticizing research which contradicts a favored perspective, a better approach is to seek consensus as to what appropriate criteria are needed to determine if retention is associated with high school dropout, then perform the necessary research which will provide answers (p.179).

Although some researchers think that dropping out of high school is directly related to retention, there was no data that showed an exact number of students retained who later drop out of high schools. The studies reviewed for this literature review demonstrates a definite need for further research.

## **Students' Social-Emotional Outcomes**

Opponents of retention have always echoed the negative effects of retention on students' social-emotional outcomes. Research on the impact of elementary school retention on students' emotional adjustment has produced mixed and inconclusive results. Four empirical studies concluded that retention in the elementary school lowered students' self-esteem (Allen, Chen, Wilson, & Hughes, 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Pagani, Vitaro, Boulerice & McDuff, 2001; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). Four other studies concluded that retention in elementary grades lower academic self-concept and even affected peer-relationship (Allen et al., 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Pagani et al., 2001; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). Three studies found that retention is associated with negative attitudes towards students who were retained. This caused the retained students' emotional distress and acceptance by their peers (Jimerson, 2001; Pagani et al., 2001; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). One text and two empirical studies concluded that students who are retained become depressed over time (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Hong & Yu, 2008, and Robles, Pina, Defrance & Cox, 2008). The three studies that were conducted overseas also saw a negative effect of retention on students' self-esteem (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Jacob & Legfran, 2002; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). Jimerson and colleagues who are strong opponents of retention concluded that elementary students who were retained suffered lower self-esteem and viewed retention as a punishment and a stigma; they did not view being retained a positive event that will help students in the long term. These researchers argued that at no time retention should be implemented as it does harm to students' social emotional outcomes, and this remains with them as they become adults.

In contrast some studies report fewer negative results pertaining to retained students and social-emotional outcomes. Four empirical studies concluded that retention does not have a

negative impact on students' social and emotional outcome (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Ehmke & Drechsel, 2010; Gleason, Kwok & Hughes, 2007; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). Four studies went as far as to conclude that students who were retained showed higher self-esteem and were significantly attached to school in comparison to their promoted peers. Four students showed that students who were retained in elementary school showed motivation and were more involved in classroom participation. Wu, West & Hughes (2010) conducted a longitudinal study on the behavior and social emotional effect on first grade students who were retained and followed them through to fourth grade. Their findings showed that students benefit from retention through 4<sup>th</sup> grade with respect to decrease hyperactivity, higher rating on positive behavior, higher ratings on positive self-esteem and higher rating on positive peer relationships. In their conclusion, however, they shared the following: "Retention may bestow social advantages in the short term but have detrimental effects on social acceptance in the longer term as students become more sensitive of being over-age for grade" (Wu, West & Hughes, 2010, p. 34). Researchers also argued that retained students may become the subject of hurtful jokes and even bullying and other harmful effects (Stapleton, et al., 2016). Educators are challenged to address social emotional outcomes whenever retention is being considered.

## **Policy**

No definitive conclusions have been reached as to how policy affects retention in school. Four empirical studies concluded that statewide educational policies were not found to have significant impact on grade retention (Andrew, 2014; Cham, Hughes, West & Im, 2015; Corman, 2003; Peterson & Hughes, 2011). Three studies found that the test-based policy was effective as students who were retained because of this policy showed growth that was sustained over a long time (Corman, 2003; Green & Winters, 2006; McCombs, Mariano & Kirby, 2010). Four studies

that were conducted in Florida to determine if the policy implemented was effective concluded that students retained in third grade showed growth (Greene & Winters, 2004; Greene & Winters, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2009; Schwerdt & West, 2012). They also concluded that the test-based promotion is not harmful but resulted in incentives for both the educators and the parents. West (2012) believed that the test-based policy still under debate in state legislatures around the nation would not only provide incentives but increase the number of early grade retention cases.

In contrast, three empirical studies concluded that test-based policies were ineffective (Andrew, 2014; Peterson & Hughes, 2011; Penfield, 2010). Four studies concluded that retention grew drastically because of the test-based policy that was implemented (Andrew, 2014; Hauser, et al., 2007; Peterson & Hughes, 2011; Penfield, 2010). The studies that were done in Florida, also concluded that the retention rate increased because of the test-based policy. Greene & Winters (2009) in their research conducted in Florida stated that, although the retention rate increased because of the policy implemented in Florida, they believe it was for the best as students who were retained because of the policy showed growth academically.

The results from studies showed that policy sharply increased the number of students held back, especially in third grade. Greene (2009) and other researchers discovered that after the test-based promotion policy was implemented, Florida third- grade students retained increased to 21, 799 a 13.5 % jump (Greene &Winters, 2004; Schwerdt & West, 2012). They discovered that this growth was consistent with national patterns. Finally, results from research done in Florida showed that after two years, students retained under Florida's test-based promotion policy outperformed comparable students who were promoted.

## **Economy**

Five studies concluded that retaining students in the same grade is costly (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Corman, 2003; Jimerson, 2001; Penfield, 2010; Sipple, Killeen & Monk, 2004). Consensus on whether retention results in any benefits for the students that would offset the costs was lacking (Bali, Anagnostopoulos & Roberts, 2005; Corman, 2003; Jimerson, 2001; Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Yang, et al., 2018). Four studies concluded that retention was costly in terms of forgone earning and time (Corman, 2003; Penfield, 2010; Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Schwerdt & West, 2012).

When it comes to employment outcomes, four studies concluded that retained students had poorer employment outcomes through age 20 than their non-retained low achieving peers. These studies also concluded that retained students earned less at age 20 (Alexander, et al., 2003; Jimerson, 2001; Penfield, 2010, and Yang, et al., 2018).

Results from the studies showed the expense of retention over time. West (2012) stated that given average per pupil spending of roughly \$10,700, the direct cost to society of retaining 2.3% of the 50 million students enrolled in American schools exceeds \$12 billion annually. West (2102) also concludes that this estimate does not include the cost of any remedial services provided for students repeating a grade, as well as any earnings forgone by retained students due to their delayed entry into the labor market.

Results from studies done by Greene et al., (2012) in Florida showed that retention was costly too. After the test-based retention policy was implemented in Florida, the cost to the state to help retained students was over \$84 million. After several years that cost increased to over \$587 million and retention rates continue to climb yearly. Finally, results show that continued

research is needed to document the effects of retention on the economy and this research will help to determine if the cost outweighs the benefit.

## **Conclusion**

A literature review was conducted and examined literature published between 2000-2020. The review of the 64 studies indicated that retention is associated with demographics, gender, low socioeconomic, academic achievement, high school dropout rate, social emotional outcomes, policies, and the economy. Results from these studies showed that retention alone is not an effective tool to increase academic over a long period. There were several studies that showed that retention was effective; however, some of these studies concluded that the growth that was observed was short-lived. Results were consistent when it came to the demographics of students retained. Examining literature from 2000-2020, it is obvious that there has not been a change with demographics. Research showed that male Black and Hispanics were more likely to be retained.

The literature included mixed findings when it comes to retention and academic achievement, retention and students' high school dropout rate, retention and social-emotional outcomes and retention and policy. There was consistency of literature when it comes to the economy. All researchers concluded that retention was costly. Most researchers believed that more research was needed to see if the benefits outweighed the cost.

Although there was more literature that concluded that retention was ineffective, they were not sufficiently sound to support the claim that retention is always wrong. Results from the literature clearly indicated that researchers took sides, and a reviewer could easily determine the findings based on the seminal pieces that were cited. The battle continues as many try to determine if retention is effective.

The 64 literatures that were reviewed did not shine light on the lived experiences of students who were retained. I think that it is important to give these students a voice and allow their experiences to be known. With this in mind, as the researcher I believe that it is important that I conduct a multiple case study, merged with narrative inquiry to tell their stories. Telling their stories will add needed information to the study of retention.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

This chapter highlights the methodology and methods of this qualitative multiple case study. The assumptions of qualitative research using a narrative inquiry method and perspectives on the case study method, data collection procedures and data analysis are outlined in this chapter. I used the lens of critical race theory to explore the experiences of Black and Hispanic males retained through Florida's mandatory third- grade retention law. Critical race theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole (Crossman, 2019). I did not attempt to determine what defines the success or failure of retention. Rather, I explored the experiences of students retained through Florida's mandatory third- grade retention law. The four participants were given the opportunity to narrate their perceptions and lived experiences of retention and this allowed me to re-tell their stories through a narrative format. The study addressed two research questions:

1. How do Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience of retention?
2. What insights can the stories of Black and Hispanic males who have been retained provide about the inequalities they face?

To answer the research questions, an appropriate mode of inquiry that would portray, interpret, and gauge the phenomena associated with the experiences of these students was sought. I chose a qualitative mode because it allowed me as a researcher the opportunity to share the experiences of the participants who were retained in third grade.

Qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting (Stake, 1995). It focuses on the "why" rather



than the "what" of social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives (Stake, 1995). Qualitative research includes several forms of inquiry that are used to explain and understand phenomena (Merriam, 1998). Rather than by logical and statistical procedures, qualitative researchers use multiple systems of inquiry for the study of human phenomena including biography, case study, historical analysis, discourse analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology (Stake, 1995).

Qualitative research seeks to understand the nature of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, rather than the researcher's perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). One of the key goals of qualitative research is "understanding the meaning people have constructed and how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 67). Qualitative research is richly descriptive. Because the research focused on understanding, process, and meaning, the data took the form of words rather than numbers and the resulting findings are presented in narrative format. Case study on its own did not provide the tools needed to describe the experience of students within the process (Sonday et al., 1999). Using narrative inquiry as a merged methodological framework helped to shape the understanding of the students' stories (Sonday et al., 1999).

This research study was guided by a critical paradigm. The critical paradigm is appropriate for this study as it operates from the perspective that research should be conducted with the explicit goal of bringing about change when there is inequality (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). According to Rehman and Alharthi (2016) the critical paradigm is focused on power, inequality, and social change.

Patton (2002) stated that the aim of critical educational research is not merely to explain or understand society but to expose injustice and racism and help to change it. Critical

researchers seek to bring to light the actions that limits minorities and ultimately causes inequalities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). It is also the responsibility of critical educational researchers to expose injustice and inequality and find a way to give voice to the voiceless (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Since my research was focused on Black and Hispanic students who have been marginalized within the education system, this paradigm is suitable for my research.

## **Methodology**

This section describes the research design that was used for this study. It gives information about the data collection and the method that I used for the analysis, followed by consideration of trustworthiness. The topics of participants, context, and ethics as they relate to this research are discussed.

## **Multiple Case Study**

The qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social units (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative case study is a research method which enables a complex phenomenon to be explored through the identification of different factors interacting with each other. The case observed is a real situation (Debout, 2016).

Multiple case study, or collective case study, refers to case study research in which several instrumental bounded cases are selected to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon than a single case can provide (Mills & Wiebe, 2010). Multiple case or collective studies use information from different studies to formulate the case for a new study. In multiple case studies, researchers seek to understand the “quintain” through some of its single cases, sites,

or manifestation (Stake, 2006). A quintain is an object, phenomenon, or condition to be studied -a target, but not a bull's eye. In multiple case studies, the target is a collection (Stake, 2016).

Yin and Stake are two leading methodologists in case study research. Yin (2003) states that when a study includes more than one single case, a multiple case study is needed. He further states that the key difference between case study and multiple case study is that the researcher can analyze the data both within each situation and across situations. Stake (1995) uses three terms to describe case studies: “intrinsic,” “instrumental,” and “collective.” Stake (1995) suggests that researchers who have a genuine interest in the case should use the “intrinsic” approach when the intent is to better understand the case. “Instrumental” case study is used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation. It provides insight into an issue or helps to refine a theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) uses the term “collective” case study when more than one case is being examined. Collective case study is another name for multiple case study.

Yin addresses his criteria for quality research, namely validity and reliability, while discussing the analytic procedures used in multiple case studies. All the techniques and strategies he suggests are conducive to enhancing validity and reliability during analysis (Yazan, 2015). Stake (1995) defines analysis as “a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71). In a Stakeian view, “Analysis essentially means taking our impressions, our observations apart” (Stake, 1995, p. 71). His arguments about data analysis are consistent with his arguments about data collection. He capitalizes on researchers' impressions as the main source of data and making sense of them as main approach to analysis (Yazan, 2015). As a result of this, I choose to align my work with Stake's multiple case study.

Multiple case study is appropriate for answering “how” and “what” questions such as my research questions (Stake, 1995). Each retained student within the learning community context will act as a separate case. This multiple case study aims to understand the experience of four students retained because of Florida’s mandatory retention law. When I think about the cases, context, and boundedness, it helps me to define what the case is. The multiple case study is bounded in time (number of years that it had been since students were retained), students’ experience (during the year that they were retained) and students’ race and ethnicity (Black and Hispanic males). Doing a case study allowed me the opportunity to gather data from the narratives that I gathered from the students during my interview sessions. I conducted a multiple case study as it fits all the criteria required to find answers to my research questions.

Multiple case study provided the researcher the opportunity to explore the following:

- Explored the experience of children retained through Florida’s mandatory third grade retention law.

- Provided an in-depth look at the experiences of the four students who had been retained.

- Used multiple data collection methods; this included interviews, arts, and journaling.

- Explored the views that were directly related to the phenomenon as they unfolded in practice.

- Allowed the researcher to contribute knowledge that can inform the field.

In this multiple case study, I explored the differences within and between the cases. My goal was to examine findings across cases. Comparisons was drawn, so it was imperative that I choose the cases carefully as this helped the researcher to predict similar results across cases or predict contrasting results based on a theory (Yin, 2003).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is an approach that focuses on the use of stories as data (Baden, 2007). The stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told through both research and literature (Baden, 2007). As a researcher, I am aware that decisions need to be made about who a story belongs to and how it is interpreted and reinterpreted. Presenting the participants' lives in story format will afford readers the opportunity to focus on how the participants made meaning of their lived experiences of retention (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method also goes hand-in-hand with qualitative case study since qualitative research seeks to understand the nature of a phenomenon from the participants' perspectives rather than the researchers' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Narrative inquiry is an old practice that may feel new for a variety of reasons (Clandinin, 2019). Human beings live and tell stories; we create meanings in our lives as well as in the ways we enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities (Clandinin, 2019). People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

According to Saldana (2009) to establish a positive narrative, the writing should include a thick description that is rich and that cultivates a rendering of the participant's life that is multi-dimensional. To achieve these accomplishments, it is important to garner the stories contained in the data and re-story them in a significant manner. It is important to establish a chronological sequence in re-storying as this strategy separates narrative from other research genres (Cortazzi, 1993). Using narratives, allowed the participants to describe specific happenings and share their feelings about their lived experiences as students who were retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law (Saldana, 2009).

## **Context**

This study took place in a large K-8 school located in south Florida. This school is a tuition free public charter school serving students in grades K-8. The school has 55 classrooms and serves 1,329 students. It has two campuses situated on over six acres of land. There is a preschool playground, an elementary playground, a large field that hosts a basketball court. and a football field. There is also a large field where practice is held for extracurricular activities. The classrooms are very large. The buildings are well kept and very secured. There are security cameras all over the building both inside and outside. The lawns are well kept, and the grounds have large trees that form a circle around the campus.

The school's motto states that educators will be passionate in their pursuit of academic excellence. With integrity and grit, they strive to provide educational programming to create lifelong learners and valued contributors to the global community. The school offers a comprehensive core curriculum including science and technology. Parents have access to PowerSchool's Student Information System. Students at this school wear uniforms and the school enforces the uniform policy. The school offers before and after school care. It also participates in the free/reduced program and all students have the opportunity to participate in clubs and extracurricular activities. The school is governed by a Board of Directors which is responsible for the legal and financial obligations of the school. The Board of Directors establishes policy consistent with the school's mission and ensures that the school's programs and operations are faithful to the terms of the charter, including compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements. Charter schools are publicly funded but privately run. The directors ensure that the school lives up to the state's expectation, which is providing excellence.

The school is known for its exemplary performance within south Florida. It has been an “A” school for eight consecutive years. There has been a waiting list of over 2,000 students. All teachers are certified, and the school’s model involves inquiry-based teaching. Technology plays a key role in every student’s development. All students have access to a computer and smart boards and computers are used daily in every classroom. Students attend Spanish, physical education., computer, music, library, and art classes. They are encouraged to learn new languages. The foreign language curriculum includes lessons that promote multi-sensory learning through integrated technology such as music and video. Age-appropriate games and culturally relevant activities are designed to take elementary/middle school students beyond the classroom and into the real world. Teachers are given an hour daily for planning and data chats meeting. Data collection is a key element in the school’s life. Data are heavily used to help improve students’ academic growth.

This school was chosen because I have been a part of its teaching team since the school opened its door to the public in 2010. As an educator and a team member, I have the opportunity to witness the day-by-day operation of the education system within the building. For the past three years, I have been privileged to work alongside the administration. This allows me access to school- wide data before it is made public to the school district. As an insider, I see firsthand how Black and Hispanic boys are treated as it relates to retention. Blacks and Hispanics are minorities within the school yet, data shows that they have the highest retention rate in the third grade when compared to their peers. The school’s data for 2018-2019, showed the following percentages of third graders retained because of the mandatory retention law in Florida. White 1.3% (n=150), Hispanics 2.7 %, Blacks 2.7%, Asian 0% and Others 0%. These data have been consistent for the past five years. This school prides itself in ensuring that all students succeed.

Conducting a multiple case study with students at this school will allow me the opportunity to share my findings that will hopefully bring about any needed change that would benefit all shareholders (sponsors of our education system).

## **Participants**

I used purposeful sampling to select the participants. Purposeful sampling is selecting participants based on specific characteristics that fit the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007). My main purposive sampling goal was to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which would best enable me to answer the research questions. Homogenous sampling was used because I was looking for participants with similar characteristics (Creswell, 2005). Specifically, I sought boys who were retained in third grade because of Florida mandatory retention law. I used students who were presently in the fifth grade. The participants in this research were able to describe their experiences and the difficulties they encountered at times in an articulate and cohesive manner. I excluded individuals who lacked that characteristic. I also excluded boys who were receiving ESOL (English as a second or foreign language) assistance during their third-grade year.

This study sought to understand the experiences of Black and Hispanic males who were retained because of the Florida's mandatory retention law. Thus, I wanted to select students who had been retained because of this law. The literature on students who were retained shows that they are mostly male, and Black and Hispanics. As the researcher, I wanted the opportunity to explore what I discovered in literature reviewed. I selected four boys, two Black males and two Hispanic males. I selected four because as a researcher, I was looking for in-depth information about the individual, (Creswell, 2005). According to Stake (2006) the multiple case study will be limited if fewer than four cases or more than 10 cases are chosen.



The exclusion of girls from this study does not mean that Black and Hispanic girls have not been retained because of the Florida mandatory retention law. However, literature relating to retention shows that for every three Black and Hispanic males that are retained, only one Black or Hispanic female is retained (West, 2012). While the literature shows that a large number of Black and Hispanic boys are retained, it shows Black girls encounter a different set of problems. Black girls are directly impacted by criminalizing policies and practices that render them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, dehumanization, and death (Morris, 2016). Morris (2016) states that nearly 48 percent of Black girls who are expelled nationwide do not have access to educational services. According to Morris (2016), “Black girls are 16 percent of female students’ population but nearly one-third of all female-based arrests.”

#### **Sean (Hispanic)**

Sean is 11 years old and is of a medium build. He is a Hispanic male who is approximately five feet tall. He has dark hair that is neatly groomed. His uniform is neatly tailored, and his appearance is immaculate. Sean is very outspoken and encountered no problem responding to questions I posed. Sean lives with his mom, dad, and two sisters. He loves to play soccer and he also loves to play video games. He likes school sometimes and his favorite subject is science.

#### **Harry (African American)**

Harry is a slender African American male who is about five feet six inches tall. He is 11 years old. His black layered hair adds a plus to his neat appearance. His uniform sits neatly on his slender physique. He is very reserved and soft-spoken; however, he is extremely intelligent and analyzes situations deeply. He is a great communicator and is never at loss for words. He

has a serious countenance and rarely smiles. He lives with his mom, brother, and sister. He is the middle child. He loves playing basketball and video games.

### **James (Hispanic)**

James is a petite Hispanic male who is about four feet and nine inches tall. He has dark curly hair that is neatly trimmed. His uniform is always neat and clean. He is soft-spoken; however, he is never at a loss for words. His ability to respond to questions is above that of his peers. He is very detailed and enjoys in-depth conversations. He is extremely pleasant and often wears a smile on his face. James lives with his mom, aunt, younger brother, and dog. He enjoys attending school and he loves all subjects. He loves playing different kinds of sports; however, his favorite is soccer. He also loves playing video games.

### **Henry (African American)**

Henry is a 12-year-old African American male who is about six feet and two inches tall and has a medium build. He has long dreads that occasionally hang over his full-face. His uniform is usually baggy, and he takes great pride in the type of shoes that he wears. He is extremely outspoken, and he is never at a loss for words especially when talking about his school life. He speaks clearly and convincingly, in a smooth tone, and often inserts a joke to lighten a tense moment during interviews. His facial expressions were interested, often tear-filled at times. He maintained superb eye contact throughout the sessions and encountered no problems responding to questions asked. Henry lives with his mom, uncle, and younger sister. He likes playing every sport, but his favorite is football. He is very good at playing football and says it is his favorite of all the sports that he plays.

### **Informed Consent/Assent**

I applied for and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Parental permission and child assent forms were also completed as required by the IRB. The IRB approval letter (Appendix E), Parental Permission document (Appendix G) and Child Assent document (Appendix F) can be found in the appendices.

After obtaining permission from the IRB, I selected the final four participants. I met with each student in a private conference room and went over the assent document. I allowed students to ask questions, and I provided all the answers as clearly as possible. Students were seated three feet away from me and we both wore masks as we were indoors and had to abide by all the rules in place for the students' safety. The Covid-19 pandemic; all protocols set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had to be followed. I then sent an email to each participant's parent asking their permission to work with their child. In this email, I gave a summary of what my study is about and why their child was selected. I then requested a conference with each parent to go over the parent permission document and get the required signature.

Each parent selected a date to meet with me. I met with each parent individually. We met in a private conference room. I gave each parent the document to read over and offered them an opportunity to ask questions. The document outlined the purpose of the study, the study procedure, benefits, risks, compensation, privacy, and confidentiality. Parents were assured that all interviews would be conducted in a private conference room and that participants' identities would never be disclosed at any time. We also sat three feet apart and wore masks. The parents and I signed the documents together.

## **Confidentiality**

All participants were under the age of 18. It was extremely important to keep their information anonymous and confidential. All signed documents, printed interviews, and journal were placed in a secure box and placed in a closet that had a key and was not accessible by anyone but me. Information gathered for this dissertation has been kept secure on a password protected computer. The online transcription application Temi was used to transcribe audio-taped interviews. All information uploaded to the transcript site has been removed. Transcripts were printed and are now stored. Pseudonyms were used during data collection, data analysis and findings to ensure all participants' confidentiality. All information gathered for this dissertation will be kept protected for five years.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection is crucial in research, as the data are meant to contribute to a better understanding of a theoretical framework (Bernard, 2002). It then becomes imperative that selecting the manner of obtaining data and from whom the data will be acquired be done with sound judgment, especially since no amount of analysis can make up for improperly collected data (Bernard et al., 1986). The data collection began in Fall 2021 and ended early in spring 2022. In qualitative research it is important to analyze data as soon as it was collected, so all data was analyzed as it was collected (Merriam,2009).

I used three data sources: interviews, a researcher's journal, and visual arts. Interviews were my primary source of data. I chose this method because in-depth interviews provide numerous opportunities for conversations and interactions between respondents and the researcher that offer information that may be difficult to communicate through surveys or quantitative methods.

### **Table 1. Data Inventory**

Source of data	Number of pages per session	Total numbers of pages
3 interviews, (three 30 minutes interviews) with each participant – (four participants)	9 pages per half hour of transcription	54 pages
Journal notes	8-10 pages per week for 3 weeks	27 pages
Visual arts	3-4 art pieces per participants	13 pages

Total Pages – 94 pages

## Interviews

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) defined an interview as “a purposeful conversation” (p. 94). Fontana and Frey (2000) identify interviewing as “one of the most common and most powerful ways” used by qualitative researchers to gain insight and understanding (p. 645). Interviewing has been considered a major means for gathering the narratives of individuals’ experiences throughout recorded history (Seidman, 2006). According to Fontana and Frey (2008), interviews are conducted between two or more people to gain an understanding of the “how” and “what” of people’s lives. Through interviews my participants, were given the opportunity to share their experiences as they relate to retention.

Seidman (2013) highly recommends the use of a three interviews series, to probe deeply into the context and to establish trust with the participants. Interview 1 establishes the context of the participant’s experience. Interview 2 allows the participant to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred. Interview 3 encourages the participant to reflect on the meaning of the experience (Seidman, 2013).

Through interviewing, I was able to enter the world of the individuals whom I studied. Seidman (2006) promoted the use of interviews as a means of “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Every individual has a story; researchers use interviews to tell individuals’ stories because they are of

worth. As a researcher, I strongly believe that rich and meaningful data regarding one's thoughts, feelings, and intentions can be gathered from interviews.

During interview one, I focused on Life History. As the interviewer, I put the participant's experience into context by allowing him to talk about himself as it relates to his interest and his experience in school. I allowed the participants to share in detail things about his background, which included information about his likes and dislikes. Participants also shared information about their family and their neighborhood. Participants were also allowed to share in detail their lives in the third grade and their journey towards retention (See Appendix A).

For interview two, I focused on The Detail of Experience. During this session, participants were asked to reflect on their lived experiences and share their reflections through visual art. Participants collected materials that were prepared and chose an area in the conference room to complete their art. They were instructed to complete as many pieces as they desired to give insights into their lived experience. After participants completed their visual arts, they were asked to share what each piece of their artwork meant (See Appendix B).

Interview three focused on Reflection on Meaning. This interview addressed the intellectual and the emotional connections between the students and their feelings towards retention. Here the participants were asked to reflect and share their feelings towards retention. Students were also allowed to complete one final piece of visual art to give a visual picture as they reflected about retention (See Appendix C).

There are three different types of interviews that are commonly used in qualitative research. They are structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews (Schwandt, 2007). For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews gave me the opportunity to be flexible with my questions as this format

does not follow a formalized list of questions. Instead, this format allowed me to ask more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the students rather than using a straightforward question and answer format.

The interviews sessions lasted for 30 minutes, and I did three interviews with each participant. This gave me a total of 12 interviews sessions. I met with each participant once weekly for three weeks. All interviews were done at the school in a private conference room. All COVID-19 protocols were followed. I was able to record most of the sessions. During one session, the participant asked me not to record. I respected his wish and journaled about the information shared during that session. All recorded information was later transcribed through Temi.com.

According to Stake (1995), just as with gathering observational data the interviewer needs to have a strong advance plan. As the interviewer, I followed the plan put forth by Stake (1995), who recommends that the interviewer should arrive with a short list of issue-oriented questions, possibly handing the respondent a copy, indicating there is a concern about completing an agenda (p. 65). To ensure the effectiveness of the interviews, I first tried out the questions in pilot form (Stake, 1995). I did a pilot interview with a student from the fifth grade, and this gave me the opportunity to make modifications before starting the interviews for my research. Stake (1995) also recommends that the interviewer needs to listen, to maybe take few or many notes, as fits the occasion, but to stay in control of the data gathering, thinking about what form the account will take in writing. During each interview session, I was careful to primarily listen and only take notes when it was extremely important to do so. According to Stake (1995), the interviewer should keep the main questions in mind, and probe carefully during the interview. Before each session, I practiced my questions, and I was ready to pose them

clearly so that my participants would understand what they were being asked. Finally, Stake (1995) stated that keeping a record of the interview is part of the artistry. I was able to keep a record of all interview sessions.

### **Researcher Journal**

My secondary data source was a researcher's journal. I kept all notes that I collected during and after the interviews. This journal also served as a space where I reflected after each session. Using a journal gave me the opportunity to record my personal reflections, questions, and initial interpretations. This included but was not limited to my commentaries. Emerson et al. (2011) stated that recording notes allows the researcher to provide thick description and narrative. This journal was with me while I conducted my interviews. I wrote in my journal daily. The journal was a place where I had the opportunity to develop further interview questions or strengthen questions that I had in my protocol. This was very effective and allowed the conversations with my participants to be rich and detailed.

My journal also served as a place to track my in-field analysis. I used it to record my personal interpretations as I reflected on information gathered and engaged in self-reflexivity. Turner (2011) encouraged researchers to consider how their own identity affects how they conceptualizes research problems and relates to their participants, and what blinders and strengths they bring to their analysis. There were times when information that I gathered provoked me, left me with questions or even triggered my emotions. Using a journal during this time helped with my reflectivity. Emerson et al. (2011) said it best, "In sum, the fluid, open-ended processes of writing resonate with the imagery of all these approaches and yet differ from them in important ways."



Recording in my journal daily gave me the opportunity to work through my emotions. There were times when I reflected on one of the day's interviews and I broke down and cried. I felt like I added to the problem because I am a part of the team and knew about some of the information shared, especially as it relates to one particular student. Below is an extract from my journal. On the day that I recorded this I was so broken. I vowed that if I could help at least one child to never have this experience, I will.

*Students internalize more than we can ever think or imagine. I was completely taken aback at the detailed information shared by my participant today. I could not help but to notice the brokenness in his eyes as he shared how retention made him feel as if he was dumb and didn't belong. I figure that I would have to probe to get more information from the participant, but that was not the case. The participant was eager to share what life has been since he was retained. The participant recognized that he struggled in reading, however, he believed that if he was given the help that he often asked for life would have been better for him. The participant blamed the teacher for not caring enough for helping him more. The tears began to roll from his eyes as he spoke. The student wondered if he was treated the way he was because he was a black boy. The participant realized that better treatment was given to other students who looked like the teacher. The participant was even careful to recognize the different tone in which the teacher spoke to him and other students. He felt that she was stern with him but calm to others who he called her favorites. The participant was so broken because he was pressured at home and at school. At one particular time the participant felt that he didn't want to live anymore because school was so hard, and he was tired of failing. The participant felt like school was a prison and he was its prisoner.*

## Visual Arts

Visual art (drawing) also served as a data source. “The power of image, and its role in society, cannot be underestimated” (Leavy, 2015). According to Leavy (2015), visual imagery does not represent a window onto the world, but rather a created perspective. Leavy (2015) further stated that visual images “evoke particular kinds of emotional and visceral responses from people (p. 225). Bell Hooks (1995) has consistently argued that there is a relationship between visual arts and group identity struggles. Using this form of data source allowed participants to share their lived experience related to retention.

Hooks (1995) conceptualizes art as a medium for conveying political ideas, concepts beliefs and information about the culture in which it is produced. Since my research aligns with critical race theory, using art as a form of data collection gave me insight into the inequalities that these students encountered because of retention.

According to Darewych and colleagues, (2015), using art allows participants to have a voice, to gain a sense of empowerment, and to have an opportunity to use their imagination. Using art also offers a way to engage self-expression (Wang et. al. 2019). My participants were encouraged to use a variety of sources when creating art that best represented their lived experiences and feelings related to being retained. The students were provided with construction sheets, art supplies and any other materials needed to create their art. Allowing them to create their art allowed for more genuine representation of their experience.

The use of an art-based method is important when working with young participants (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). Students were given 10 minutes during one of the 30- minute sessions to create their work and then share and explain their work. I used the interview protocol to guide the sessions when students were creating their artwork. Students were then allowed time to

explain their art pieces. The art pieces acted as a data that could be analyzed across the study. The art gave a visual representation of each student's experience. Using visual arts allowed me the opportunity to make meaning of the students' experience and value their experience, and it also supported reflexivity throughout the research (Kofi, 2013). Mohr (2014) stated that engaging in creativity through art is a way to work through difficult experiences. Creating and sharing their art pieces gave participants an opportunity to work through difficult experiences that they encountered.

### **Data Analysis**

Stake (1995) stated that data analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations. Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process of organizing the data into categories and identifying patterns in categories that emerge from the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). When a researcher analyzes data, they sort and organize data. To help me analyze the data that was collected, I used a transcription service, Temi.com to transcribe all the recordings that were collected, and I also used HyperResearch software to help organize the data, keep a record of codes, and examine data by code.

I then began to code the data. According to Saldana (2009), a code in a qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summarizing, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (p. 3). In the beginning, I used open coding. Open coding refers to the initial interpretive process by which raw research data are first systematically analyzed and categorized (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Through open coding, I was able to get a sense of the categories.

I then used axial coding. Saldana (2009) stated that axial coding seeks to determine the dominant codes by removing redundant codes and eliminating synonyms. Once I sorted the

codes into categories that could be managed, I organized the data. To arrive at the narratives, I gathered the transcript I began reading through and began labelling each section to get a beginning, a middle and an ending. As I read, I place a 'B' beside phrases that I thought would fit at the beginning. Then, I put a 'M' besides phrases that depicted their lived experiences, and this would be the middle. Finally, I put an 'E' besides phrases that would go at the end. I then used a large construction sheet and divided it into three sections that were labeled beginning, middle and end. I cut out phrases and placed them under each category. To get the narrative to be effective I re-storied the interviews that were gathered. According to Creswell (2002) 're-storied' is a process that aim to produce incisive engaging narratives from the interview transcript.

I was able to condense the interviews by removing some words that were repeated throughout the interview. I was also able to condense the interview by removing phrases that were not needed to add a rich flavor to their narratives. There were times when I had to reorder sections. That is, there were information that were shared during interview three that were relevant to be placed at the beginning of the narrative and not at the end. This also ensure that readers would understand the narratives and get a clear understanding of each participant's lived experiences.

As I re-storied the interviews, few words were added for clarity and for the flow of the narratives. The words added were not used to change or misrepresent the participants view, instead they were used for clarification and proper flow of the narratives. For example, when Sean was asked to describe how he felt returning to the third grade, he shared the following, "I was shaking because I wasn't sure if anyone in the class know that I am staying back." In the final narrative I wrote, "On the first day of school, I was nervous. I did not know if anyone in

my class knew that I was repeating the third grade.” I was always careful to go back to the transcript to ensure that the voice of the participants was shared. When the narratives came together, there was three distinct plots. The beginning- ‘Background and Journey to Retention;’ ‘Lived Experiences as a Student Who Was Retained’ and ‘Current Views About Retention.’

Another form of data analysis was the visual art that was created by the participants. According to Leavy (2015) visual imagery does not represent a window onto the world, but rather a created perspective. Leavy (2015) further stated that visual images “evoke particular kinds of emotional and visceral responses from people” (p. 225). The participants explained each piece of art that they created. Their explanations of each art pieces were recorded and transcribed. Participants were able to give detailed information about their art pieces. The lived experiences of the four participants came through very strongly through their artwork. Once I was able to get the three plots for the narratives, after analyzing the data, the art pieces were inserted to give the narratives a visual representation. Using the arts gives the readers a deeper insight into their lived experiences.

As I coded, I was careful to view information that was surfacing through a critical race theory lens. Derrick Bell, who is considered the father of critical race theory wrote five tenets. I used the modified version of the tenets that were written by Ladson-Billings since her work focused on education and the inequity in the school system. As I analyzed the data, I was careful to ask questions to each of the five tenets. Is racism random or is racism the normal order of things in U.S. society? Secondly, I analyzed data to see if the participants teachers or policy makers sought racial justice if there is something in it for them. Through analysis I looked to see if the participants were treated the way they were because their teachers have constructed social categories and organizations that rely heavily on arbitrary genetic differences like skin color,

hair, texture, eye shape, and lip size. Another question that surfaced throughout my analysis had to do with the way students were treated. Were they treated the way they were because race has been such a flashpoint in America and all people perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways? Finally, as I analyzed the data and gathered information for the narrative, I was careful that the narratives that will be shared reflect a perspective and underscore the teller, audience, society, and those who are in power. All five tenets composed by Ladson-Billing (1998) guided this study. Detailed discussion is recorded in chapter six.

I conducted a multiple case study and to be effective, cross -case synthesis was completed. I coded each student's data separately and then coded across them. I coded all round one interviews, then round two and finally round three interviews. Each student's information was written as a separate case once I synthesized the data. As I synthesized the data, I noticed similar patterns across all four participants. Similarities included but were not limited to their struggle in reading, how they all asked for help, how they all felt embarrassed and how they all viewed retention as being bad. I recorded all the similarities that were discovered to analyze further.

I noticed that all four participants had similar experiences across the themes that were discovered. All four participants felt like they were neglected when they asked for help. All the participants suffered emotional trauma. They all felt that they were dumb and did not belong. They all lost friends and felt like their freedom was taken away during the summer because they all had to attend summer school. Finally, all four participants shared how they were not allowed to take part in extracurricular activities because they had low grades and had to attend tutoring after school. Themes will be discussed in detailed in chapter five. Using narrative inquiry, I

presented my findings in the form of storytelling. I was careful not to allow my pre-conceived analysis to interfere in my work as I sought answers to the question posed.

### **Narrative Inquiry and Data Analysis**

Narrative inquiry was used to develop an in-depth-perspectives of the four participants' lived experiences in relation to retention. Narrative inquiry is an approach that focuses on the use of stories as data (Baden, 2007). The stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature (Baden, 2007). Using narrative inquiry as a data analysis method gave me the opportunity to share the findings from this qualitative study. Narrative inquiry has been used to for many years to effect changes for minorities who so often have been underrepresented especially in the school system.

I have always enjoyed telling stories and it was important to know that qualitative research reports can be presented using narrative inquiry. According to Caulley (2008), narrative inquiry tells a story using facts but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy. I used several techniques to present my findings. The first was using realistic details. In my presentation, I used realistic concrete details and details of real life as this will conjure emotions and paint a clear picture for my readers. I think that using this method helps to arouse and hold my reader's attention and elicit an understanding the lived experiences of the four participants who were retained because of the Florida's mandatory retention law.

The second technique that I used was the "Show, Don't Tell" approach. In showing, I was able to offer realistic details. Giving realistic concrete details of real life conjures emotions and images for the reader (Caulley, 2008). It was important that I presented detailed information and "Show, Don't Tell" was the perfect technique. A detail is "definite" and "concrete" when it

appeals to the senses so that it can be seen, heard, smelled, and tasted, or touched (Burroway, 2003, p. 431). The students' experiences need to be told in their entirety and I think that these two techniques are effective in helping readers to pull back the curtain and for a few minutes live in the students' world as they shared their lived experiences. Stake (1995) stated that for the reader's sake, and for the case's sake, this research situation's best story needs to be found. He further stated that an effective author tells what is needed and leaves the rest to the reader.

Stake (1995) outlines an effective way of writing the report. Using this technique, I was able to organize my narrative and present my case (p. 123).

1. Entry vignette - I want my readers immediately to start developing a vicarious experience, to get a feel of the place, time.
2. Issue identification, purpose, and method of study - I think this helps readers to understand the case.
3. Extensive narrative description to further define case and contexts – This presents a body of relatively uncontestable data.
4. Development of issues – Developing key issues draws on other research or on my understanding of other cases.
5. Descriptive detail, documents, quotations, and triangulating data – This is the place for the most confirming experiential data.
6. Assertions - It is my intention to provide information that allows readers to reconsider their knowledge of the case.
7. Closing vignette – This close on an experiential note, reminding the reader that the report is just one's person's encounter with a complex case.



According to Simmons (2009), telling our stories is a lived and changing experience. In the telling, we reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience (p. 76). Graham (2011) believes that narrative is a preferred method in critical race theory. CRT insists that researchers must make every effort to be honest in the interpretation and the research as a whole (Graham, 2011). Since this study relies heavily on critical race theory, I was able to achieve unbiased and impartial analysis from information gathered. CRT believes that telling minorities' stories can do away with the contentment that may go along with a lack of empathy and false objectivity (Graham, 2011).

This analysis identified several tenets of CRT: racism is ordinary: convergence is about alignment, not truism: humans have constructed social categories: and race has been a flashpoint in America, so we almost believe that our challenges stem solely from racial injustice. Looking through a CRT lens racism was evident in the shared experiences of the participants. Color-blindness and meritocracy are mutually intertwined and serve to marginalize minorities (Hartlep, 2009). Using the above tenets, I was able to analyze data collected and through the findings and discussion that follows this chapter I was able to expose the impact the above tenets have on the lived experience of Black and Hispanic males who were retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law.

## **Ethics**

According to Simmons (2009) ethics describes how we behave or should behave in relation to the people with whom we interact. Ethics are extremely important, and my research considered procedural ethics (such as human subjects) and situated and culturally specific ethics. Case study research is highly interpretive (Stake, 1995) and involves people's personal accounts

of their lives. Ethics were key for me as my research focused on individuals of different cultural and ethnic group backgrounds. I was relatable, making sure that my participants knew that they mattered, and I valued what they had to share. It was important that my participants knew that they were being treated fairly and that if difficult issues arose, these could be discussed and resolved (Simmons, 2009).

Simmons (2009) outlined “Ethical Issues in Research Design,” which I used as a guide as I completed my research. These ethical issues are as follow: First, researchers should promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. Second, ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, and mutual respect. Third, researchers can be held accountable to the public. Fourth, researchers should seek to build public support. Finally, researchers should promote moral and social values (p. 99). I considered at the outset what ethical issues might arise in my particular case. The students who were selected see me as an authoritative figure as I have been a part of their school’s administrative team for many years. It was possible that they would think that sharing their experiences could get them in trouble. I was prepared to respond had this problem occurred. According to Simmons (2009), it is important for researchers be conscious of what kind of ethics they personally aspire to and what values they hold in relation to their research topics (p. 99).

As I went into the field, I embraced Simmons’ guidelines. Simmons (2019) mentioned that trust is essential to good field relations, but it cannot be assumed; it must be created in the process of conducting the research (p. 100). Ethics in the field are extremely important, and I was guided by the following questions posed by Simmons (2009):

1. Are my questions in the interviews sensitive, and not too intrusive?

2. When observing, am I invading participants' privacy?
3. Have I recorded participants' perspectives accurately?
4. Am I documenting participants' stories or confirming my previous theories?
5. Have my biases led to unfair selection of data or interpretation?
6. Have I portrayed participants fairly in reporting?

Finally, I did my best to tell the four participants' stories. I tried to be honest in presenting their experiences. Because they are children, I followed Simmons' advice and anonymized my subjects. Children may be less able to defend their privacy or agree that information about them be publicly shared. I stood in the gap for them and represented them well, and their identities will never be exposed.

### **Trustworthiness**

In pursuit of establishing trustworthiness, I used the eight "big-tent" criteria. Tracy (2010): worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence.

### **Worthy Topic**

According to Tracy (2010), having a worthy topic means that the research of the topic is relevant, timely, significant, and interesting. I strongly believe that my topic is worthy as it is relevant for this time and age. Studies have shown that retention influences students emotionally and leads to low self-esteem, that retained students are more likely to have behavioral problems because of their age differences as they share classrooms with newly promoted students, and that retention puts a financial burden on the education system within each state as extra money has to be spent to keep students in the school system longer (Xia & Glennie, 2005; Xia & Kirby, 2009).

My topic warrants a high level of interest because not many researchers have shared the experience of students who have been retained.

### **Rich Rigor**

Rich rigor occurs when the study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, samples, contexts, and analysis processes (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). I believe that my research is rigorous as I used enough data to support significant claims. I spent enough time gathering interesting and significant data. I provided appropriate context or samples that are related to the goals of the study. Finally, I used appropriate procedures in terms of field notes style, interviewing practices and analysis procedures (Tracy, 2010).

### **Sincerity**

Sincerity is characterized by self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher and transparency about methods and challenges (Tracy, 2010). My research is lined with sincerity. The use of the term “sincerity” is not meant to connote a single, authentic reality, but as a researcher, I presented honesty about my background and biases, and the ways in which these factors might play a role in the execution of my data collection and analysis (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). This goal was achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing (Tracy, 2010).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is marked by thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit knowledge, and showing rather than telling. It is also marked by triangulation or crystallization, multivocality and member reflections (Tracy, 2010). I believe that my research is credible. Credibility in my research refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the

research findings (p. 842). For quantitative research, credibility is earned through reliability, replicability, consistency, and accuracy (Golafshani, 2003).

### **Resonance**

Resonance exists when the research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through aesthetic, evocative representation, naturalistic generalizations, and transferable findings (Tracy, 2010). I believe that my research is resonant as it includes the ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect my intended audience (Tracy, 2010). As a researcher, I engage in practices that promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research among readers who have no direct experience with the topic that I discussed.

### **Significant**

Significant research contributes conceptually and theoretically, practically, morally, methodologically, and heuristically (Tracy, 2010). My research is significant as I seek to extend knowledge about the topic, work on improving the practice, and generate ongoing research, and finally, I seek to liberate or empower those who desire to be liberated or empowered.

### **Ethical**

To be ethical, the research considers procedural ethics (such as those related to the treatment of human subjects), situated and culturally specific ethics, relational ethics and exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research) (Tracy, 2010). As a researcher, I embrace ethics in whatever I do or say. I have come to the realization that ethics are not just a means, but rather constitute a universal end goal of quality itself, regardless of paradigm. I embrace what Miles and Huberman (1994) noted: “We must consider the rightness or wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying, to our colleagues, and those who sponsor our work” (p. 23).

## **Meaningful Coherence**

Meaningful coherence occurs when the study achieves what it purports to be about, uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals, and meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other (Tracy, 2010). My research has meaningful coherence as it achieved its stated purpose of discovering the experiences of two Black and two Hispanic males who were retained because of Florida's mandatory law; it accomplishes what it espouses to be about, which is bringing to light research that shines light on a problem which is often overlooked, the experiences of Black and Hispanic males who are retained; it uses methods and representation practices that partner well with its espoused theories and paradigms and finally, I attentively interconnect the literature reviewed with my research foci, methods, and findings.

Finally, I engaged in self-reflexivity as it pertains to the topic that I investigated. I was transparent about the methods that I used. My research is credible as I endeavor to provide a thick description, concrete detail, and explication of tacit knowledge, and I seek to show rather than tell. It is my desire to have my research influence particular readers through aesthetic, evocative representation. I also offer transferable findings. My research provides a significant contribution in that it will be practical and morally solid (Tracy, 2010).

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I outlined the study design, providing details on narrative inquiry and its use for the findings of this study. I discussed research design including participant selection, context selection and various types of data collection procedures that were used. Finally, I discussed issues of ethics, reciprocity, trustworthiness, rigor, sincerity, worthy topic, credibility,

significance, and resonance. The following chapter, Chapter 4, highlights the findings presented in a narrative format. Chapter 5 contains the implications and conclusions for this study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

The four participants for this study were selected because they were retained in third grade due to Florida's mandatory retention law. The Florida mandatory retention law states that third graders who do not score at level two or above on the statewide Florida Standards Assessment – English Language Arts (FSA-ELA) must be retained (not promoted to grade four). The four participants who were selected are presently in the fifth grade. It was crucial to use fifth graders because at this level they can provide rich descriptions that can provide insight into their lived experiences as students who were retained.

The purpose of this research is to understand how third grade retention policies in Florida's mandatory retention law have influenced students' lives and lived experiences. The truth is that students can offer priceless insight as it relates to their education, and they are able to contribute substantial information that can bring about a change to the education system. The participants in this research were able to describe their experiences and the difficulties they encountered at times in an articulate and cohesive manner.

As an educator and a researcher, I do not have a neutral position. I know I carried my beliefs, passions, and experiences with me as I embarked on this research. To account for this, I posed the questions clearly to my participants and allowed them to respond accordingly. At no time were participants coaxed into responding a certain way to questions that were asked. I did not offer any suggestions as to how they should respond to the given questions. I encouraged my participants to speak freely about their experiences. While my participants spoke, I listened carefully to what they had to share. At times, I repeated what I heard to make sure that I



understood them correctly. I made extensive efforts to ensure that their lived experiences are represented accurately by obtaining transcripts for all the recordings and re-reading notes taken in my journal. When I conducted the analysis, I interpreted the narratives and selected the most important points regarding each participants lived experience. Finally, I allowed two trusted peers to conduct a review on the original transcripts and my narratives, comparing them both to determine whether the narratives reflected the experiences of the participants.

To begin, I will provide a participant description narrative for each participant, providing their background, and outlining the experiences they encountered that led to their retention in the third grade. These will be followed by narratives that detail each participant's lived experiences as students who were retained. The final narratives will describe where they are now and how the participants view retention. These narratives comprise each participant's journey through their education and include events that drastically changed their lives forever. The process for creating these narratives was discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Background and Journey to Retention**

#### **Sean**

Sean (pseudonym) is 11 years old and is of medium built. He is a Hispanic male and is approximately five feet tall. He has dark hair that is neatly groomed. His uniform is neatly tailored, and his appearance is immaculate. Sean is very outspoken and encountered no problem responding to questions posed. His tone changed at times, especially when he had to respond to questions pertaining to retention. Following is a narrative that presents Sean's background information and his journey to retention.

*I live with my mom, dad and two sisters, in a quiet and beautiful neighborhood. One of my sisters is older than me and my other sister is younger than me. I am the only boy, and I am*

*the middle child. My parents are very strict about my education, and they want me to do well all the time. I like school sometimes but whenever I don't do well, I don't like it that much. I love playing sports. I love all sports, but I am really good at soccer. I don't get to play a lot of sports right now because all my extra time goes into schoolwork. I don't like that, but it is what it is. I have to bring up all my grades.*

*I don't like math, social studies and reading classes. I find math challenging and the other two I think are just boring. I love science very much. My science teacher makes us do many experiments and I really enjoy that. I don't have many friends in my class. All my friends are in the sixth grade. My best friend Ian (pseudonym) no longer attends this school, but he is in the sixth grade because he didn't repeat a grade. We have been friends since we were in kindergarten. His parents and my parents talk all the time, but I am never allowed to visit his home. I think that my parents would allow him to come by my house, but he never asked. Whenever we have a playdate, it is always at an amusement park. We have been to Busch Gardens and Universal Studios.*

*My family and I have been on several vacation. We don't go every year because my dad and mom are always working. We have been on a cruise, and we visited St. Martin. I can't remember the name of the other island that we visited. I have also been to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. I really like visiting Puerto Rico. My mom is from Puerto Rico. I like their food and I enjoy visiting the beaches. Their beaches are different from ours in Tampa. I think that their beaches are more beautiful. I wish that I could live in Puerto Rico, but my parents say that they don't think that we will be moving anytime soon.*

*I have been attending this school since kindergarten. I remember the first time that I went into the third grade. I was excited because I finally had the opportunity to be upstairs. At*

*the beginning of the school year, I was doing well. I had more work than the previous school year. In second grade I was given a package to complete at the end of the week for homework. In math we did addition and subtraction and for reading our stories were very short. In the third grade, we had homework every night. We had to study times table, do handouts, and we also had to do two pieces of computer-based homework. That is a lot of work, and I became frustrated.*

*My mom had a conference with my teachers and told them that I was struggling and if they could help me. My teachers didn't help me. I had two teachers in the third grade. One taught me reading and social studies and the other taught me math and science. I was failing all the tests. I hated school. I cried every morning in my room, but I still had to attend school. I began to attend tutoring at school but that didn't help. When I attended tutoring, I was placed on the computer. I didn't understand the work on the computer, so I didn't do well. I told my mom that all I did was work on the computer and no one was explaining anything to me. My dad told me to try harder and ask for help. I asked for help, but I was told to work harder. I was trying my best and I became more frustrated and stopped asking for help. I sort of didn't care anymore because no one was helping me.*

*I was failing in both classes. Then my teacher began to tell me that if I didn't do better in reading that I was going to repeat the third grade. I went home and cried and cried and cried. My mom came to my room and asked me what happened at school. I told her that I was going to repeat the third grade if I didn't pass my reading FSA. My mom assured me that she would do everything to make sure that I didn't repeat the grade.*

*My mom got me a tutor and I was doing well with that tutor but when I went into my classes I wasn't understanding anything. I think I would understand if the teacher worked with*

*me in a small group. The teachers told my parents that they would work with me in a small group but that didn't happen. The math was hard, and the reading passages were long and boring. My reading teacher said that the reason why I was having problem in her class was because I spoke Spanish at home. I told her that my parents spoke Spanish, but I didn't. I didn't even understand Spanish that much.*

*Every day that I went to school, all I heard was FSA, FSA. I was afraid to take the FSA because I knew that I would fail. I have been failing everything and everyone kept telling me to try harder. I was trying to do my best, but my best was not good enough. I hated school; I hated the third grade. I wanted to go to a new school because the teachers were ignoring me. All I did was tests and more tests. I was failing every one of the tests. I wanted to play sports at school, but I wasn't allowed to. I wasn't allowed to play sports at school because I had Ds and Fs on my report card. In order to play sports at school you must have all As and Bs. That made me very sad. The one thing that I loved was taken away from me because I was doing so badly in school.*

*The day that I dreaded finally arrived. It was the day to take the FSA. I was very nervous, but my parents prayed with me and told me to do my best. My dad told me that I was more than a grade and that I shouldn't be worried about the FSA because it was just a test. I did the test, and it was difficult, but I didn't think that I would fail. I understood most of the questions and I did my best. I was happy that it was over.*

*The results came back, and I received a level one. I cried for many days. My parents kept me home for several days because I couldn't stop crying. My biggest fear was becoming a reality. I was going to stay back in the third grade. They gave me a reading test every day to see if I could pass those. If I passed those tests, then I would go to the fourth grade. My reading*

*teacher encouraged me to do my best. I did my best on all the tests, but I still didn't pass. The teacher told my parents that if I passed a test given during summer school, I will be able to go to fourth grade.*

*School ended for all my friends but not for me. I had to attend summer school. No summer school was at my school. I had to attend summer school at a school nearby my house. I didn't like the school that was near my house, but I had to attend it because I did not pass the FSA. I had to attend summer school from 9 a.m. to noon. I didn't want to go because my sisters didn't have to go to school. All my friends were enjoying their summer and I had to go to school. My mom told me to look at the bright side. She told me that I was going to get some help with my reading and then I would be able to go to the fourth grade.*

*I walked into my new school, and I was scared. It was big and it was totally different from this school. The building was old, and it wasn't as clean and shiny like this school. I did not know where my classroom was located. My parents were not able to take me to school because it started at 9 a.m. and they had to be at work by 7 a.m. There was no early care. I went to the office, and someone took me to the classroom. The room was large, much larger than this one. I sat at the back because I did not know anyone. The teacher was very nice, and she asked all of us to move to the front. There were all boys in my class. I wasn't sure if there was another class with girls but there were only boys in my room. There were about 13 boys in my class. I don't remember if there were any white male in my class. There were many Blacks and Hispanic boys.*

*Summer school was okay, but I wasn't enjoying it. The teacher placed us in three groups. I was placed in a group with some boys that looked like me. The boys were always speaking Spanish, so I think that the teacher thought that I also spoke Spanish. I didn't say*

*anything because I didn't really know this teacher. She wasn't really teaching me anything. I was placed on the computer to do a reading program. I enjoyed the program sometimes because there was a game section that whenever I completed a lesson, I was able to play a game. I was getting good grades on the program and sometimes the teacher came over to my group and worked with us, but I didn't need much help because I was doing great*

*The final week of summer school we had to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). I didn't attend school on the Monday and Tuesday because I had a stomachache and a bad headache. My mom told me that I had to go to school on Wednesday because I had to do my final test. I still wasn't feeling well but I had to go. On the day of the test, my headache became worse. I told the teacher that I wasn't feeling well. She told me to do the test and then she would call my mom to come and get me as soon as I was finished.*

*I tried to my best on the test, but I was just not feeling well. I wanted to throw up. I could hardly read the words on the paper, and I was wearing my glasses. My eyes were just paining me from the headache and stomachache. I didn't read the passages. I just bubbled in the answers because I was in pain and wanted to go home. I raised my hands when I was finished. The teacher came over and she was surprised that I was finished. She took my paper and sent me to the office. My mom came and got me. I had a temperature, so my mom took me to the walk-in clinic. Summer school was over, and I was sick for one week, so I still didn't get to have any fun.*

*A few weeks before school was scheduled to reopen, my mom received a letter from my school. The letter stated that I failed the SAT and I had to repeat third grade. They also sent my results. I really failed that exam; my score was very bad. It wasn't my fault, I was sick. My mom and dad sat me down and told me what I already knew. I had to repeat the third grade and*

*there was nothing else that they could do to help me. I began to cry, and my mom held me and told me it was going to be okay. At first, I was ashamed, and I thought all my friends would laugh at me. I asked if I could go to a new school and my parents said no immediately. For the rest of the summer all I could think about was repeating the grade. There were times when I didn't eat because I was so sad, and I didn't want to go back to school. I was sad and just wished that school would never open because I didn't want to go back into the third grade.*

### **Harry**

Harry (pseudonym) is a slender African American male who is about five feet and six inches tall. He is 11 years old. His black layered hair adds a plus to his neat appearance. His uniform sits neatly on his slender physique. He is very reserved and soft-spoken; however, he is extremely intelligent and analyzes situations deeply. He is a great communicator and is never at a loss for words. He has a serious countenance and rarely smiles. Following is a narrative that presents Harry's background information and his journey to retention.

*I live in a quiet neighborhood with my mom, brother, and sister. My brother is older, I am the middle child, and my sister is the youngest. My dad does not live with us; however, I get to see at least once or twice monthly. When we were living in North Carolina, Dad used to live with us. When we moved to Florida, Dad moved out and I don't get to see him often. At first, I was sad about it but after a while I got used to not seeing him around and it doesn't bother me anymore. I was about five years old when he moved out. My mom doesn't talk about him, so I don't talk about him either.*

*I don't go on vacation. Recently, we went back to North Carolina to visit family members. I was born in North Carolina, and I miss it very much. I was five years old when we moved but I remember living there. My mom's family lives there, and I think that one day we*

*will be going back there. I am not sure when we will be going back because mom says houses are cheaper in Florida. I think that if you can get a nice big house for a cheaper price, why go back to a smaller one.*

*I have been attending this school since first grade. When I was in first grade school was easy for me and I was excited to attend school daily. I don't remember what happened in second grade. I did many packages on weekends and I loved my teacher. When I started third grade, I was excited because I was in the same classroom with my best friend. We have been best friends since first grade but when we went to second grade we went to different classes. I was so happy to be back in the same classroom with him.*

*Third grade was different than second grade. In third grade, I had two teachers. My homeroom teacher taught me English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies, and my other teacher taught me math and science. I did not like ELA that class was boring. In the morning I had to do I-Ready on the computer. This was a reading program because I struggled in reading. I don't like reading those boring stories, I like math. In reading, I was given some stories that I could not relate to. Most of the stories were about old white dead presidents or some other white people. In February my teacher would read something about a Black person. The only black person my teacher knew was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. You would believe that he was the only Black person who did something great in America.*

*I love reading sports magazines and I also love reading about space and nature. I was never given those books to read in ELA class. I read about space in science class, and I also read about living and nonliving things. Those things got my attention, and I did well in science and math class but not reading class. My grades in reading class were always D's or F's. I tried my best to do better, but I still struggled. My mom signed me up for the tutoring program.*



*That was a big joke. I was struggling in reading and answering the comprehension questions and what did the tutoring teacher do? She put me on a computer and gave me reading comprehension passages to do. I needed help to choose the correct answers, but I was left on my own to figure it out.*

*I told mom that tutoring was a waste of time and that I wasn't being helped. She told me to be respectful and be thankful that the teachers were giving me extra time. I was thankful but I wasn't getting help and my teachers, and my mom weren't listening to me. My dad wasn't around much but when he visited, he asked me about my grades. I told him that I didn't like reading classes and I was struggling a lot to bring up my grades. He said that he would call my teacher and see if there was anything else that could be done. My dad never called my teacher, but my mom did because I was always upset every Wednesday when she picked me up from tutoring.*

*After the conference call with my teacher, my mom was mad at me. She stated that my reading teacher said that I was giving her a hard time in class because I was talking back and being very sarcastic at times in class. I couldn't believe that my teacher told my mom that I was giving her a hard time. I wasn't giving her a hard time; I was having a hard time. I couldn't understand the reading passages and she didn't help me. Most of the time my reading teacher talked at me, not to me. I just think she didn't like black students because all of us black students were always getting in trouble. But my mom didn't believe me. She believed my teacher and there was nothing that could be done about that.*

*My mom was not happy about my grades and finally questioned how I was doing so great in math and science class, but I was failing miserably in reading and social studies. I told her every day that my reading teacher treated me and some other kids differently. The teacher says*

*that I was a troublemaker even though I did not do anything wrong in her class. If I didn't understand the work, I would raise my hand and ask a question. She told me that I wasn't paying attention and that was why I didn't understand. I continued to fail reading class, but my mom thought it was too late to ask for a change of class.*

*The FSA was coming up very soon and we were doing many practice packages. The passages were long and again the topics were boring. Even though I did not like the passages, I really tried to do my best. I tried harder than some of the other kids in class, but I always missed the passing mark. My teacher told me that if I didn't do well on the reading exam, I would not be going to the fourth grade. This was the first- time that I heard about this. I was doing well in all the other subjects except reading and social studies so I didn't understand why failing one class could keep me back in the third grade. I didn't think about it because I knew that my mom would not let me repeat third grade.*

*I did the FSA in March, and I was confident that I did well because I read over the passages and answered all the questions that were on the paper. I was happy that the exam was over, and I didn't have to do so many practice packages. One day the teacher gave me an envelope to give to my mom. I didn't think much about it because my teacher always sends home letters to my parents. Not everyone in my class received a letter that day though. My best friend didn't receive a letter. When I reached home, I gave the letter to my mom. She told me that it was a conference request letter about the FSA results. I didn't really understand what was going on, but mom looked very sad. Mom said that I had to be in the meeting as well. I thought I was in trouble because that same day, Frank (pseudonym) ran into me at recess, and I pushed him, and I had to sit out at recess for the remaining time.*

*On the day of the meeting my mom held my hand tightly as we walked to the conference room, and it was there that I realized that something was not right. There were four people in the room, my reading teacher, my math teacher, my mom, and me. My reading teacher shared with everyone in the room that I failed the reading FSA as I received a level one on the test. I still didn't understand what was going on. She went on to inform us that according to the Florida mandatory retention law, I would have to repeat the third grade. I sat there and all I remember was repeat third grade, repeat third grade, repeat third grade. Those words kept playing in my head and I did not hear anything else that was said.*

*My mom looked at me with tears in her eyes and asked me if I understood what my teacher said. I told her no. She then explained to me that because I didn't pass the FSA reading exam, I could not go to fourth grade. My teacher then shared that I could attend summer school and if I did well and pass a test at the end of the program I could be promoted. However, she believed that repeating the third grade was best for me because I was way behind on my reading skills. My mom began to cry. I wasn't going to cry but I didn't like to see my mom crying. I told her that I was sorry, and I really tried my best to pass but I didn't understand all of the questions.*

*She told me that I had nothing to be sorry about and it was all her fault because I told her that I needed help and she didn't do much to help me. I think the teachers began crying too, but I wasn't sure. I don't think my reading teacher was crying, maybe my math teacher. My reading teacher was always mean to me, and she always yelled at me and the other Black boys in her class, so I don't think she cared that much. If my teacher helped me, then I could have passed reading like I passed math. I got a level four on my math FSA.*

*I attended summer school that summer, but I didn't do my best. I didn't care about school anymore. All that was on my mind was going back into the third grade. I didn't try my best because mom signed the paper that stated that I would repeat the third grade. Going to summer school was like a punishment. I attended summer school at a new school. I did not know anyone there, and I wasn't interested in talking to anyone. It was mostly boys who looked like me and some were Hispanics, but I didn't care to have any friends. I became very quiet. I never asked any questions. Whenever the teacher asked me a question I wouldn't answer. The teacher would come and sit beside me and asked me if I was okay and I would nod my head. I felt safer being quiet and I haven't spoken much in class from that time until now. No one listens whenever I speak, and I was ashamed that if I spoke the other kids would make fun of me because I was repeating the third grade.*

### **James**

James (pseudonym) is a petite Hispanic male who is about four feet and nine inches tall. He has dark curly hair that is neatly trimmed. His uniform is always neat and clean. He is soft-spoken; however, he is never at a loss for words. His ability to respond to questions is above that of his peers. He is very detailed and enjoys in-depth conversations. He is extremely pleasant and often wears a smile on his face. Following is a narrative that presents James' background information and his journey to retention.

*I live in an apartment with my mom, my aunt, my younger brother, and my dog. My aunt moved from New York, and she is staying with us until she finds an apartment. I enjoy having my aunt staying with us because she is my mom's only sister and whenever she is around my mom is happier. I love school. I have always loved school. I like all subjects, but I struggle in math sometimes. I love playing all kinds of sports, but my favorite is soccer. I don't get to play*

*sports during school time because I have to spend my extra time in tutoring. My mom says that whenever I am in middle school, I can play sports again.*

*I haven't been on vacation for a while. When my dad was around, we used to go on vacation every year. I would also visit New York often, but since my aunt lives with us now, I no longer go to New York. However, we always go to theme parks. I enjoy riding on roller coasters. It gives me a thrill and when I am riding in a roller coaster, I feel so free and close to my dad. My dad is in heaven and the roller coaster brings me so much closer to the cloud and I just look up and talk to him.*

*I have been attending this school since kindergarten. My dad was the one who wanted me to attend this school and my mom thinks that he would want me to stay here until I graduate so I will not be leaving this school anytime soon. I love school. I don't remember much about kindergarten or first grade. I remember second grade because my teacher was amazing. She made learning fun and I was so sad when I left her class, but I was excited to go to the third grade.*

*Third grade was different from second grade because I was expected to be more responsible. I now had two teachers. One taught me reading and social studies and the other teacher taught me math and science. In second grade I had one teacher and I stayed in one classroom. I had to change rooms when I went to third grade. I was managing all my classes and I was making all A's and B's. My parents made sure that I did my homework. I was living my best life, enjoying school, and making everyone proud.*

*During the second quarter, things began to change at home. One morning my dad woke up and he began to complain about a headache. I didn't think much about it because everyone becomes sick. Dad went to the doctor, and he was given the bad news. My dad had a tumor and*

*he had to do surgery. I missed many days of schools because I had to visit my dad in the hospital and Mom was busy taking care of Dad. Things got worse and as soon as Dad came home, he had to go back into the hospital. This time, Dad didn't come back home. My dad passed away from cancer. My mom was so broken, and my brother and I cried every day for our dad. My dad was my best friend. We did everything together, and I couldn't believe that he was gone.*

*I was absent from school for a while, but my teachers knew that my dad passed away. When I returned to school, I was broken and confused. I didn't understand the lessons that both my teachers were teaching. I am not sure if my teachers expected me to do schoolwork when I was out, but I couldn't. I spent most of my days locked in my room crying because I missed my dad so much. I was far behind on all my lessons. I was failing my weekly tests. My mom was concerned but she understood what was going on. She reached out to my teacher to see how they could help me. They offered me free tutoring after school.*

*In tutoring, I wasn't receiving much help. I was often placed on the computer to complete lessons. I didn't understand some of the lessons and I didn't do well. I know I should have asked for help, but the truth is, I didn't really care about school anymore. Nothing seemed right and I really didn't know how to ask for help. My class teachers didn't help much, or maybe they did, and I didn't try hard enough. My mom tried to help as much as she could, but she was sad most of the times. She encouraged me to do my best because she knew that I was very smart. She told me that it wouldn't be long before I would get caught up with the other kids. I know that I was smart, but nothing was the same anymore and everyone wanted me to act like everything was the same.*

*It was time for the FSA. I didn't think much about it. My mom said it was only a test and I must just do my best. She reminded me that it was just a test. I wasn't nervous because I was*

*always doing tests. I did the FSA, and I didn't like it. Some of the passages were long and I didn't read through it as thoroughly as I should. I looked at the questions and tried to answer them. Maybe I could have done better but school was just not what it used to be without Dad here.*

*One day when I went to school, my teacher gave me a letter to give my mom. When I went home my mom asked me for the letter. Apparently, my teacher sent my mom an email informing her that I had an important letter for her. I gave my mom the letter and as she opened it, I walked away. I had no clue what the letter was about. Mom later told me that she had to attend a meeting because I failed the FSA, and there was a possibility that I was going to repeat the third grade. I asked her why I was going to repeat the grade; then she told me that I failed the FSA. I still didn't understand what failing the FSA had to do with repeating the third grade.*

*During the meeting, I had to be present, and my two teachers and the principal were also present. My reading teacher told us that because I received a level one on my FSA I had to be retained. She told us that the Florida mandatory retention law states that I had to get a level two to go to the fourth grade. In a split second, I understood what they were talking about. I wasn't going to go to the fourth grade. I did not say anything, but I held on to my mom tightly. She hugged me and told me that everything was going to be okay. I didn't cry in that meeting. I wanted to, but I didn't. I had to be strong for my mom. My teacher told us that I had to attend summer school. My teachers said that they understood that I had had a life changing experience, and that I had missed a lot of school. They both believed that retention would help, me and even if I passed the final test during summer school, they highly recommended that I repeat third grade because that would help me.*

*I remember when I went home, I ran straight to my room, and I cried and cried. I couldn't stop crying. I knew that I was smart. I wished my dad was here because he would fix everything like he always did. I didn't think that I should repeat third grade. I started to think about my friends. I thought about telling them, but I was too embarrassed. I was about to lose my friends. I was losing everything, and it made me really sad. I didn't tell my friends that I was not going to fourth grade. My mom agreed with the teacher that staying back in the third grade would only make me better.*

*Summer school was okay; however, I felt like I was being punished for grieving the death of my father. I met some new friends. The teacher was very nice, and I learned a lot. The teacher helped me with my reading comprehension skills. This was the first Black teacher that I had. Most of the students in my summer school class were Black or Hispanic boys. I think there were girls in summer school, but there weren't any in my class. Maybe they separated us. I wasn't sure, and I didn't ask why there were no girls in my class. It really didn't matter. Summer school took away my fun time. I didn't get a chance to be a kid and most of the time I kept thinking about repeating the third grade. My mom said that Dad would want me to repeat so that I could be my best. I thought that if Dad was alive, I would never have to repeat the third grade because I would still be making all A's and B's. I didn't think it was fair that I had to repeat because I knew that I could do the work.*

### **Henry**

Henry (pseudonym) is a 12-year-old African American male with a medium build who is about six feet and two inches tall. He has long dreads that occasionally hangs over his full face. His uniform is usually baggy, and he takes great pride in the type of shoes that he wears. He is extremely outspoken, and he is never at a loss for words especially when talking about his school



life. He speaks clearly and convincingly, in a smooth tone and often inserted a joke to lighten a tense moment during the interviews. His facial expressions were interested, often tear-filled at times. He maintained superb eye contact throughout the sessions and encountered no problems responding to questions asked. Following is a narrative that presents Henry's background information and his journey to retention.

*I live with my mom, younger sister, and my uncle who many people say is my grandfather - but no one tells me anything, that is what I hear - my grandmother, and one of my cousins. My neighborhood is not quiet. I have some nosey neighbors who are always arguing, and they are always in everybody's business. My dad lives about 30 minutes away from my mom's house. I go to my dad every weekend. I wish that I could live with my dad, but my mom won't let me live with him. My mom and I fight a lot because she doesn't listen to me, especially when I talk to her about my schoolwork. No one listens to me.*

*I don't remember ever going on a vacation. My dad promised to take me to Jamaica, but I am not sure my mom will let him take me there. My dad is from Jamaica, but he has been living in America since he was my age. I would really love to visit Jamaica one day. I sometimes go to theme parks with my family. That is as much vacation time as I get. I like theme parks, though. The only things that I dislike are roller coasters. I am already tall; I don't need to be any higher off the ground.*

*I like playing every sport. I am really good at playing football. My dad wants me to play soccer, but I prefer playing football or baseball. I recently started playing basketball. Coach told my mom that I am very athletic, and basketball will be a good sport for me. I am not crazy about basketball; I think everyone thinks that I will be good at it because of my height. I feel clumsy at it, but I guess I will get better at it if I continue to practice.*

*I started attending this school since first grade. The school that I attended before wasn't as big and clean as this one. I spent two years in kindergarten because I wasn't ready for first grade. My mom didn't think that I was learning at that school so that is the reason why I changed schools. I like it here, but sometimes I think the work is too hard. I like second grade best of all. We had more free time and more fun.*

*I don't remember how I felt when I first started third grade. I was now going to be on the second floor and that was exciting. I could now climb up the stairs daily and I thought that was fun. Third grade was different from all of the other grades that I have been in before. In third grade, I had two teachers. My homeroom teacher taught me math and science, and my other teacher taught me reading and social studies. My favorite subjects in the third grade were physical education and computers. I enjoyed those classes because I did well in those classes. During physical education classes, I had the opportunity to be the best at whatever I did. I am very competitive and physical education class brought out my competitive spirit. In computer class, I had the opportunity to be creative. I was able to create games and make unique designs.*

*I struggled in all the other classes, math, reading, science, and social studies. I think that they are boring. I was not given any opportunity to be creative. The teachers just talked and talked, and I just sat there and listened. In math class, the teacher went so fast you would think that she was competing in a marathon. I didn't understand anything. When I asked for help, she would tell me that whenever I stopped being a class clown, I could get some help. I wasn't a class clown. Whenever I didn't understand I would just ask her to slow down or explain the steps again. I guess she didn't like that. I think she saw me as some threat. I was bigger than the other kids in the third grade. I couldn't help that I was bigger. I was still a kid and I needed*

*help like anyone else. The truth is, I don't think she liked me because I am a big Black boy. That's what my dad says, and I think my dad is right.*

*I struggled in reading. I have always struggled in reading. That is why I stayed in kindergarten for two years. All my teachers knew that I wasn't a good reader. My reading teacher tried to help me whenever she had the time. There were other kids who needed help too, so maybe that's why I wasn't given much help. I was often placed on a computer, but I couldn't read most of the words. I was placed into tutoring, but that did not work out for me either. In tutoring, I was placed on a program that I didn't understand much. I often raised my hand for help and the teacher told me to read the instructions. Now that was funny because duh, I couldn't read well. That is the reason why I was attending tutoring. Maybe she thought that I was a genius trying to waste some time.*

*I really tried to do much better, but the truth was I was really struggling. I don't think my teachers really cared, or maybe they had given up on me. I hated testing; I really did. I still hate taking test now. Whenever I had to do a test, I literally froze. All my test scores were low. My reading teacher often threatened me, telling me that if I didn't try harder, I would fail the FSA, and then I couldn't get promoted to fourth grade. I didn't take what my teacher was saying seriously. I knew that I was going to the fourth grade, and nothing could stop me.*

*On the day of the examination, I felt confident. My grandmother prayed for me and encouraged me to do my best. I was nervous as soon as the teacher handed me the booklet. I began to sweat because this was the biggest exam in the third grade, and I had to do my best. All I could hear in my head was my teacher saying, "If you don't pass the FSA, you are not going to the fourth grade." I was determined to do my best because I wanted to go to the fourth*

*grade. I already repeated a grade, and I didn't want to repeat another grade. When the test was over, I wasn't sure I did well. I couldn't read most of the words, but I tried my best.*

*About a month after the FSA, I was given a letter for my parents. I wasn't sure what the letter was all about, and I didn't think about it. When mom picked me up, I gave her the letter. She said, "What did you do now?" I did not answer my mom because I knew that I didn't do anything wrong. When we got home, Mom read the letter and told me that we had to attend an important conference. She called my dad and told him about the conference. I knew that something was wrong, but I didn't know what it was. On the day of the conference, I was so nervous. My mom, dad, two teachers, and the vice principal were present at the meeting.*

*My reading teacher began to talk. She shared with my parents that the FSA results were back, and I failed. She further stated that I received a level one and because of the Florida mandatory retention law I could not be promoted to fourth grade. She kept on talking but I think I was blocked out, and all I heard in my head was not going to the fourth grade. I think it kept playing in my head like music. What could she mean that I was not going to the fourth grade? I heard my dad calling my name and I jumped as his firm voice frightened me. He was mad at me for not trying my best in school. He started yelling that I played my game system too much, and he warned me about playing games and not doing my schoolwork. I tried to tell him that I tried but I wasn't given much help in school or at home.*

*Everyone was mad at me, but they all knew that I needed help and they didn't help me. Now everyone was acting like it was all my fault. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't going to cry because I never wanted anyone to see me cry. My dad taught me that strong men don't cry, they confront their problems and get things done. I didn't know what I needed to do. I looked at my mom for some sort of comfort but all I saw were tears gathering. It was then that I began to cry.*

*I couldn't hold it in any longer. I knew that my dad was going to be mad at me for crying but I was sad. I didn't want to repeat the third grade.*

*They told us that I had to attend summer school. I was really mad now. I have attended summer school every year and I really didn't want to go to summer school again. My dad asked why I had to attend summer school since I was going to repeat the grade. The vice principal told us that I would get help with my reading, and I would be taught things that I missed during the school year. My dad wasn't happy about it, but he signed the paper. I would never forget that day I remember it like it was yesterday.*

*I had to attend a school in my district for summer school because there was no summer school at my school. The school was large and ugly. I didn't like those brick buildings. The building looked like a prison, and I felt like I was their prisoner. My mom walked me to the office. They asked me my name and told my mom which room to take me to. I didn't want to stay, and Mom saw the fear in my eyes. She told me that it was only for half day and that I would be fine.*

*The teacher introduced herself and told me to choose a seat. There were more boys than girls. There were only two white kids in the class. It was mostly Black and Hispanic males in that room. It was scary. It felt like a boot camp. I knew that I wasn't going like it. They did the same things as my other teachers. The teacher just talked and talked and then gave us a worksheet. Oh, one thing was different this teacher walked around and asked if we needed help. I asked for help, and she helped me to read the words that I didn't know. She challenged me to sound out the letters and put them together to get the words. I was proud of myself because I was able to sound my letters and get the words. I was reading a little better and I was happy.*

*I still didn't like attending summer school. My dad took away my game privileges. I couldn't play any games at all. He also took away my phone. He told me that I had to earn everything back by doing my best in summer school. This made me mad and sad. I always tried to do my best. I gave it my all, but I was still punished. It wasn't my fault, but no one listened to me. My reading teacher didn't help me much and my tutoring teacher didn't do anything at all, and yet I was blamed for not doing my best. I didn't understand adults at all. Remember when I told you that the school looked like a prison? Well, I was definitely a prisoner because I was a kid, and I couldn't have any fun because I failed an absurd test. I was going to repeat the third grade and there wasn't anything that I could do to change that. Life was dark for me, and I was not looking forward to going back to school in the fall.*

### **Lived Experiences as a Student Who Was Retained**

#### **Sean**

*School was about to start, and it was the first time that I did not want to go back. Both my siblings were excited to return, but not me. Open House was two days before school and each year I was excited to attend, but not that year. I asked my mom if I could stay home but she insisted that I had to meet my teachers before the first day of school. I thought to myself that my mom must have forgotten that I was going back into the third grade. I came up with a plan so that I did not have to attend the Open House at school.*

*The Open House was scheduled for 1 pm. Mom prepared lunch for the family because she wanted us to eat before we left, the house. I ate my lunch quickly and forced myself to throw up in the bathroom. Dad said that I was just nervous and that I would be okay. Mom checked my temperature, and I was okay so they both decided that I would not stay home. My plan did not work, and I ended up attending the Open House.*

*At the Open House, I held closely to my mom. I didn't want to see my old friends. I just thought to myself that I was going to lose all my friends. My parents tried to encourage me, telling me that I would do better, but I all I thought about was what everyone else was thinking about. To me, repeating a grade meant that I wasn't smart enough. I was a failure and that made me very sad. I was even scared of being bullied by other kids.*



**Figure 1.** Sean's thoughts about what would happen

*On the first day of school, I was nervous. I didn't know if anyone in my class knew that I was repeating the third grade. I didn't have the same teachers I had the previous school year. I held my head down most of the time because I felt ashamed and embarrassed because I was repeating the third grade. I had no friends and I felt stupid. I felt sick to my stomach, and all I wanted to do was to go home. My teachers were very nice and tried to make me feel comfortable, but I hated school and didn't want to be there.*

*I was crying inside and in my head all I could hear were the words "stupid," "dumb," "crybaby," and so many negative words. I didn't think that anyone would like me, and I also felt that I was a disgrace to my family. My siblings were very smart and never repeated a grade. I*

was the first one in my family to repeat a grade, and that made me very sad. My mom always told me that I was a star, but I didn't feel like one, and I didn't believe her. Stars didn't repeat grades. I felt like an absolute loser.



**Figure 2.** Sean's feelings about himself

The work was the same and I was familiar with most of the work that my teachers gave me in class. I did most of my homework by myself and I was proud of myself. However, when I was given the tests, I would get low grades. I wasn't sure what was happening. I understood the work, but I didn't do well on tests. I began to get worried and started believing that I was unintelligent. I was doing the same work so I should be making better grades, but I wasn't. I wasn't making all D's and F's like the previous year, but I was making some low C's.

I could hear the disappointment in my dad's voice each time that we spoke about schoolwork. Sometimes he acted as if I wasn't trying hard enough and even yelled at me. Mom was more patient with me and encouraged me to study more and do my best. I wasn't getting any extra help at school. My parents thought that I would receive much more support since I was repeating the grade. Maybe the teachers were saying that I should know the work because it



*was my second time doing it. To be honest, I couldn't blame the teachers. I should have done so much better.*

*One day while I was in the kitchen, I overheard my mom and dad talking about me. My dad said that he was worried that something was wrong with me. He said that no one in our family struggled as much as I did, and he didn't know what else to do. My dad did not know that I was in the kitchen and that I heard the entire conversation. I walked through the side door where I couldn't be seen and just went to my room and started crying. My dad thought that I was dumb. He didn't say those words, but I knew that he was thinking it.*

*At school I started acting out because I was mad at my dad, but I kept everything inside. I didn't tell anyone. I just felt that my dad thought that I wasn't smart enough and that really hurts. I felt like I disappointed him and that made me so angry. I was sent to the principal's office many times for my behavior. My parents were mad, and I would be punished every time I got in trouble at school.*

*Things weren't getting better, but they weren't getting worse either. I made some good grades on my times table tests sometimes, and other times I failed. My reading wasn't improving much, and again, I was put in a program called I-Ready. That program was to help me improve my reading. I had to go in that program three times each week. I did not care much for that program. It was the worst ever. I stopped getting into trouble at school because my dad told me that if I got in trouble again that he was going to sell all my games and my game system. I didn't want that to happen because that was my only comfort.*

*My teachers didn't treat me differently from the other students, they just didn't help me. They weren't mean or anything like that. I think that they had given up on me sometimes. One day in reading class, I was really struggling with this passage. It was talking about something*

*that I wasn't familiar with. I asked the teacher to help me to understand the passage, and she looked at me and said, "Seriously?" I never asked her for help after that. I wasn't given the extra help that I needed to be successful. Thinking about it, I don't think my teachers knew how to teach students like me who are not very smart.*

*I didn't have many friends. All my friends were in the other grade. I don't think anyone knew that I was retained, so no one mocked me about repeating the third grade. One day while we were on the playground a boy named, Jeremy (pseudonym) called me stupid because I got a math problem wrong in class. I told the teacher, and he was sent to the office immediately. That was the only time that a student said something mean to me.*

*I missed my old friends though. Life wasn't the same. Sometimes I would see some of them when I went to the restroom. They would say hi, but they never stopped and talked to me like we used to talk when we were in the same grade. I think that they felt sorry for me or something like that. I wasn't invited to join in their battles on the game system. There is this one game that we always played together. It was called "Prodigy." It was a math game. Whenever I solved a problem, I would get the opportunity to battle. My old friends and I would always battle and since we are no longer in the same class, we never battled again. I sent some of them some invitations to battle, and no one responded. That really hurt, so I don't battle anymore.*

*After spring break, we did not come back to school because of COVID, and I had to attend classes on Zoom. I did not learn anything. Our teacher told us that our assignments were posted online, and we were left on our own to do them. Mom began working from home so most of the time she assisted me with my work. I understood when Mom explained the work to me. She took her time and explained everything step by step. I didn't feel like I was stupid when I was working with my mom. Most of the time, Mom would explain and leave me to help my*

*siblings and I did my work on my own. I was proud of myself once again. My mom received an email from school that said because of the COVID we were not going to be taking the FSA. It was the happiest day of my life.*

*I continued to do my work and I was making better grades. One day Mom sat me down and asked me to tell her about my school life when I attended face- to- face classes. I told her how my teachers taught us, but I was never given help like the way she helped me. My mom looked at me and said, “Son, I am so sorry that I didn’t help you more. You are very smart.” I was so elated that Mom believed in me and thought that I was smart. She continued to work with me daily, and I was improving. I wanted my mom to be my teacher. My mom told my dad how smart I was. She told him that I only needed some extra help. My dad told me that he was proud of me and encouraged me to keep working hard.*

*In fourth grade I had the choice to do online school or face- to- face. My parents decided that face- to- face learning was better for me. There were not many kids who were in the building. Most of the students were online. I still didn’t keep many friends. I tried my best every day and my parents were helping me when I got home. Whenever I would get a low grade, I would always think about repeating the grade. I live in constant fear of repeating another grade. I don’t think I have ever forgotten that I repeated a grade. I think that is something that I will remember for the rest of my life. School was getting better for me, but not because I was getting extra help from school. My mom got me a tutor who came to my house three times weekly to help me with my work.*

*I took the FSA in fourth grade, and I did better. I did not get a level three like I wanted. I missed it by less than 10 points. Again, I was disappointed, but Mom said that I should be very proud of myself because I improved. It was a hard year because of COVID, and my teachers*

were teaching both online and face- to- face. If I hadn't had a personal tutor, I would not have gotten a level two. Even though I was retained, I didn't get extra help to improve.

I am now in the fifth grade. I still have a tutor. My mom said that she is not taking any chance. I need the help and I am happy for the help. Everything is basically the same as the other grades. Sometimes I do well, and sometimes I fail, but I keep trying to do my best. I love the fifth grade so far and the teachers make the classes fun. In this grade, I am challenged to be more independent because next year I will be going to middle school. My wish remains the same: I wish that my teachers would reach me at my level and help me to be successful.

Retention has been difficult for me, and if my mom didn't help me, I am not sure that I would be making better grades. I think it has been difficult for everyone in my family, too, because of my behavior that almost got me suspended from school. My mom said that COVID was a blessing for me because she had the time to help me and saw that I had the ability to do better. I have never spoken to my siblings about my feelings about retention, but I think they knew how hurt repeating a grade made me feel. My siblings often saw how angry I became when I was constantly failing. I am not sure if they will fully understand how I felt. No one will. I will always remember that I was retained in the third grade because I didn't pass the FSA. This experience will forever be a negative one in my book.

### **Harry**

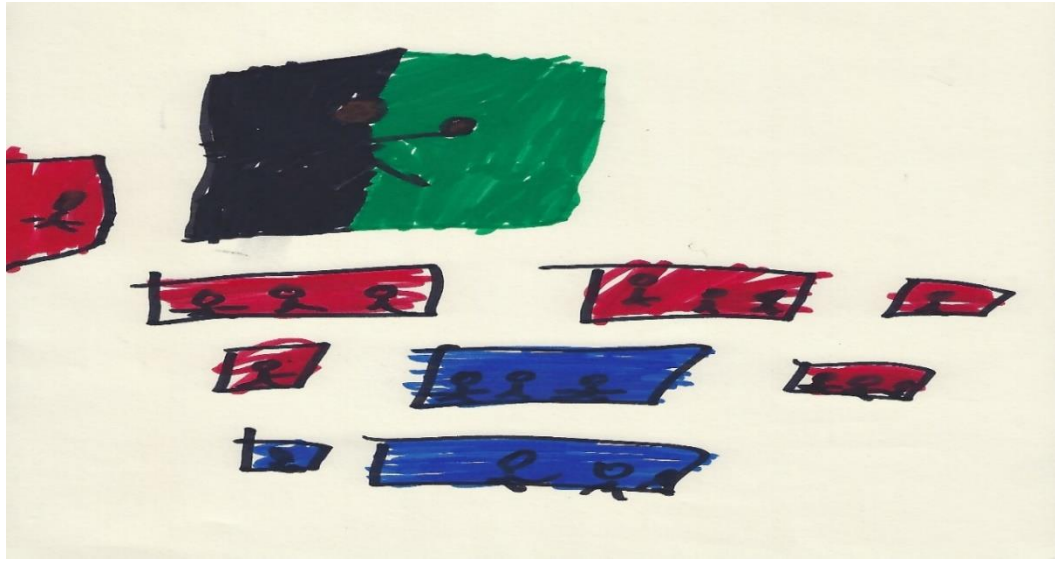
Going back to school was a nightmare for me. I was embarrassed because I was going back into the third grade. I had a growth spurt during the summer so I knew that I would be taller than everyone in the classroom. My mom promised me that things would be better and encouraged me to have a positive attitude towards school. "You have been given a second chance son; many kids don't get this opportunity. I want you to give it your best and I will be

*with you every step of the way.” I heard every word my mom said, but I was still afraid of school.*

*School was a prison for me. I see it as a dark place that had many mean kids and a few good ones. I didn’t want to be there. In class I kept to myself. I didn’t speak to anyone, not even to the teacher. I believed that if I spoke the kids would find out that I was repeating the third grade. I just knew that they would mock me, and that would make me sad and angry. Not talking made me felt safe. My teachers were concerned about me and often asked if I was okay. I told them yes. They didn’t know why I was so quiet, and I didn’t tell them. I have been quiet ever since I repeated the third grade, and my classmates will never find out that I repeated the grade.*

*I didn’t have any friends in my third-grade class. The kids looked different from the friends that I knew last year. Some were always talking and getting into trouble. Some were nice and they tried to be my friends. I spoke sometimes when we were on the playground, but many times I stood and stared at them. They were having fun, but I wasn’t. There were days when I tried to play or talk to the other kids, but I was too afraid that my secret would be discovered so I kept to myself.*

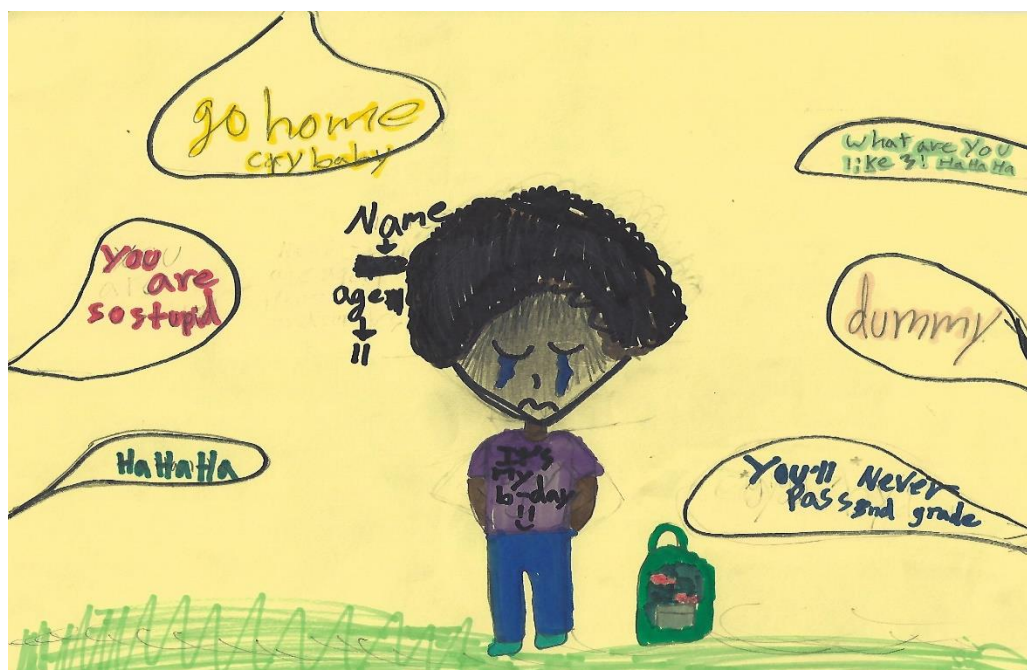
*The classwork was pretty easy for me at the beginning. I was understanding the work because I did it before. There was nothing new. I was given the same work. Getting the right answers made me feel good sometimes. I only wished that I had gotten them right the year before because if I did, I would not be back in the third grade. For math, I had a Black male teacher, and he was very patient with me. He was different from my other teachers. He cared for me, and he always helped whenever I asked a question. My reading teacher was very nice too.*



**Figure 3.** Harry's view of school life

*My two teachers worked with me in a small group and explained things to me. I really didn't like going to the small table. I felt that I was dumb. I knew that they were trying to help me, but this was my second time in the third grade so I should be very smart. It made me feel really sad and, in my head, I was thinking that the other kids were saying mean things about me. I didn't hear them say anything bad about me, but it was just in my head that they were doing so.*

*One day when I was in reading class, my teacher called on me to answer a question. I knew the answer, or I thought I did, but my lips suddenly became frozen, and I didn't answer. She waited for me and encouraged me to answer but I just couldn't. I was mad at myself for not trying to open my mouth. My teacher was really nice, and I didn't want to upset her, but I didn't want to answer and get it wrong. I thought if I got it wrong then everybody would laugh at me. I always had that picture in the back of my head that everyone knew that I repeated the grade, and they were laughing at me.*



**Figure 4.** Harry's constant thoughts

*We went out to recess. On the playground we have a big shade tree. No one was sitting there, and I went to sit by myself. I remember that I curled up under the tree and held my head down. I wasn't messing with anyone. Then suddenly two boys Errol (pseudonym) and Mark (pseudonym) came by and started pointing fingers at me. "Hey why don't you talk up in class?" said Errol. "I think that he is dumb," said Mark. They were both laughing at me, and I began to cry. Those two always got into trouble and I was now their target. My teacher found out what happened, and they both received a detention for saying that word to me.*

*I lost all my friends that I had when I was in the third grade the first time. I saw them in the hallway, but I hid each time or held my head down so they wouldn't talk to me. I couldn't face my old friends. I was too embarrassed. They knew that I was repeating the grade and I couldn't have them laughing at me. My best friend wasn't my best friend anymore. I really didn't care but it hurts. They were now in the fourth grade so I understood why they wouldn't want any friend in the third grade.*



**Figure 5.** Harry's encounter with some bullies

*My siblings never spoke about me repeating the third grade, so I am not sure how they felt. They treated me like they always did and things at home were normal. Home was my safe place. We didn't talk about school that much when we were home. My mom usually checked if I completed my homework, and she checked my work and explained anything that I got incorrect. One day while she was checking my test papers, she was upset with me for failing my spelling test. "Harry, you know these spelling words, why did you miss so many?" she yelled. I remember that I ran into my room and slammed the door. "Boy, get back here, we are not going through this mess again this year."*

*My mom was upset with me because I failed a spelling test. I think she was afraid that I was going to repeat the third grade again. I always thought that I would repeat again because I wasn't smart like the other kids, but I didn't think my mom thought so too. She later apologized for yelling at me. My dad never spoke about my retention whenever he visited us. He always told me how smart I was, but I never believed him. He was saying that because he was my dad.*



*I didn't do any FSA again in third grade because of the COVID pandemic. We had to finish school at home online. The teachers taught us online. We had to do much of the work by ourselves. My brother and my mom helped me with most of my work, so I made good grades. We were all happy when school was over. I think my mom was the happiest. She was tired of submitting those papers. I was happy because I wasn't going to repeat the third grade again because we didn't take that test.*

*Fourth grade was okay for me. I still didn't talk, and I kept to myself. My teachers were strict and did more yelling than all the other teachers that I had. I wasn't affected by the yelling. I learned how to shut every sound out. I sat there and didn't hear anything. I sometimes daydreamed of a world where I was happy again. A world where I had all my old friends back and everything was back to normal. COVID was affecting everyone. I had to do face-to-face classes because I was retained in third grade so even though things were scary and people were getting sick, I had to be in school and not online because I failed a grade.*

*I did the FSA reading in fourth grade. This time I had to do writing. I hate writing. I received a level two. I was happy that it wasn't a level one. According to my teacher, I did not gain mastery, but I would be going to the fifth grade. She advised my mom to send me to summer school to improve my reading. My mom was upset with the school. She said that they didn't help me, and they knew that I have been struggling since third grade. My mom said that she was not sending me to any summer school. My dad called my teachers racist. He said it was because I was Black why they didn't help me. He told my mom to change my school, but Mom said it was worse in the other schools. Mom said I would finish fifth grade and then she would change my school.*

*I am now in the fifth grade and my feelings remain the same about school. I wish that I could stay home. School is still a dark place for me. I now have three teachers and that makes life challenging for me. I am still quiet and that will never change. I enjoy being quiet. My reading teacher is okay. She helps me to understand whenever she sees me struggling. So far, my grades are okay, and I continue to struggle in reading class.*

*Repeating a grade is never a good experience. I lost friends, I lost my voice because I am scared that if I speak, the other kids will find out that I repeated a grade. I worry all the time if I am going to repeat a grade again. I do my best, but sometimes I don't get a passing grade. Each time that happens, I begin to cry because I think that if I continue to fail, I will definitely be repeating another grade. I cry inside, I can never let anyone sees me cry.*

*The teachers told my mom that I didn't talk at school, and now she worries all the time if I need to see a therapist. I know that I will never see a therapist because my dad said no son of his would go and get therapy. I blame my teachers who didn't help me when I asked for help. I sometimes blame my mom for not believing me when I told her how those teachers treated me. I blame myself too. It was my fault; I should have tried harder.*

### **James**

*A few days before school reopened, I became very sad. My mom took us shopping for school supplies. My brother was going into a new grade, and I was going back into the third grade. Everything my mom picked up and asked me if I liked, I said no. I didn't like anything because I really didn't want to go back to school. We were also shopping on my dad's birthday and that made me very sad. I wanted to go home. There were many kids in the store where we were, and they were all excited picking out their school supplies. Mom picked out my school supplies and my little brother picked out his.*

*When we got home, I sat at the table in my dad's seat, and I began to cry. My mom sat at the other end and tried to encourage me. My little brother was just about the place. One time he tried to come over to my side and did some pushups. I love doing pushups. My dad and I always competed against each other. That was one of our favorite things to do. I went to my room. I ran to my window. That was my favorite part of my room. When I looked through my window, it always seemed that dad was there. I would just look up in the sky and talk with him. I opened the window and I told dad that I didn't want to go back to school. I told him I missed him, and I wanted him to come back and make everything right again. When I looked up at the sun, I thought I saw a heart and I felt that dad heard me. I go by that window every day to talk with dad since that day.*

*It was time for school, and I had two new teachers. My math teacher was a black male, and he was very nice. My ELA teacher was also very nice. I looked around the room and everything looked different from what I was used to. I had one friend in my classroom because he repeated the grade with me. I was happy that I knew someone in the class, and I sat beside him. He was happy that I was there too.*

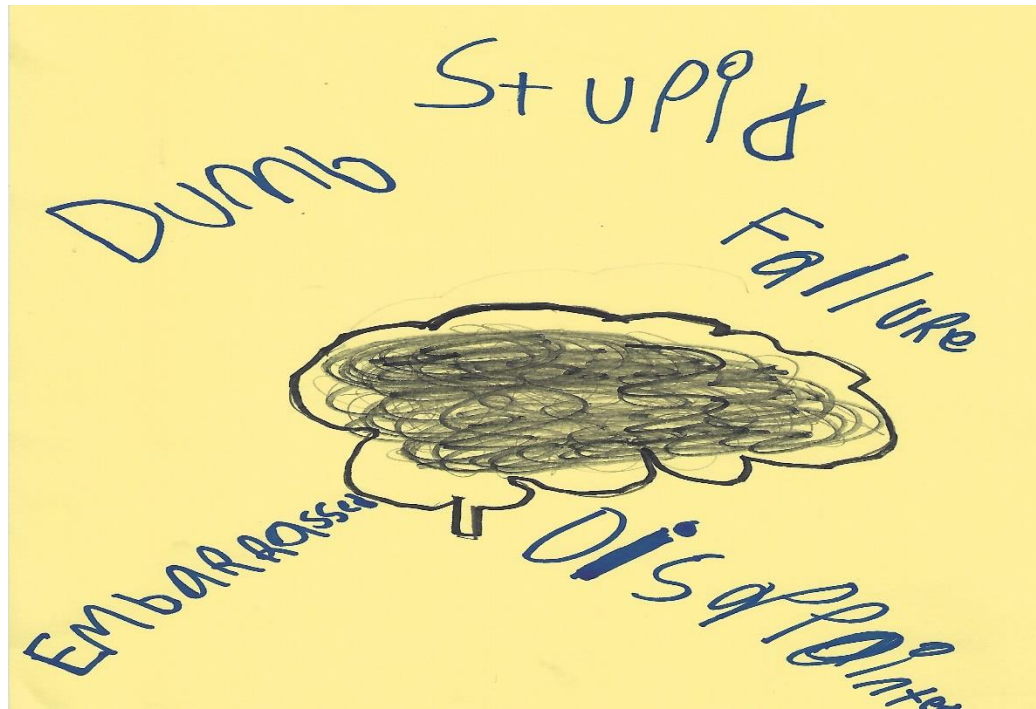
*At the beginning I was still angry. I felt like I was a failure. I was disappointed in the system that made me repeat the third grade. Everyone knew that my dad passed away, but I wasn't given the extra help to be successful. I always made good grades so my teachers should have had enough faith in me and believe that I would bounce back. I think they made the decision too quickly to hold me back. My summer was taken away and I didn't get a chance to be a kid. I spent all my time thinking about repeating the third grade and I also felt embarrassed.*



**Figure 6.** James's reaction to going back to school

*School was easy for me. I was given back all the same work. Sometimes I felt bored, but I did the work anyway. I enjoyed making A's and Bs again. At the back of my head, I could hear my dad telling me that he was proud of me. I wanted to make good grades. Each week whenever I did a test and got back my results, I would run to my room and to my window and talk with my dad. He kept me going. I knew that he was with me. My teachers were also great. My math teacher challenged me, especially with my times table quizzes. I was completing the quiz in the given time. Sometimes I missed few questions, but I still got a good grade.*

*In the first quarter I made the honor roll, and I was happy. My mom said, "Son, I am so proud of you, I told you that repeating the grade would work out in your favor. I wish your dad was here to see how happy you are." I knew my dad was always with me. I wasn't sure that repeating the grade was making me smarter. Before my dad passed, I was making good grades. I was just happy that I wasn't dumb. I no longer felt like I was a failure, but I was still embarrassed that I had to repeat the grade.*



**Figure 7.** James's thoughts about himself

*There is one incident that happened to me that I will never forget. On the day of the award ceremony, my old teacher came up to me and said that she was so proud of me and that she was happy that I was doing so well. "I hope you now see why repeating the third grade was important." I didn't think that repeating the grade was important. I knew I could do the work and if she had taken the time to know me, she would have known that. I told my mom and she said that was insensitive and she should never have said that to me. I think my mom sent her an email. We never spoke about it again.*

*I loss some friends but not everyone. I still had my best friend. He didn't care that I repeated a grade. We were able to hang out sometimes and he never let me feel differently. We didn't even talk about school. Some of the other kids spoke with me whenever they saw me in the hallway. I didn't see most of them because they were on the other side of the building. I don't think that they would have made fun of me, and I don't think that I would have cared that much.*

*Yes, they were in a grade ahead of me, but I was doing well the second time around and I was happy and thankful.*

*Repeating a grade affected my family. My mom was always sad because dad wasn't around, and she was also sad because I was angry about repeating a grade. There were days when Mom wanted to get out of the house to do something with us and I would begin to cry because I didn't want to leave the house. Repeating the third grade had consumed my mind. There were days when I didn't want to eat either. My little brother didn't understand what was going on with me, but because I was angry most of the time it affected him. He often tried to cheer me up and that made me laugh inside.*

*I finished the third grade at home because of COVID. Our school was closed, and all the students had to do school online. I didn't take the FSA again in the third grade because it was canceled. I was disappointed that it was canceled. I wanted to show my old teacher that I could pass the reading exam. My mom was sent a schedule and she explained it to me. I knew when to get on to Zoom. My schoolwork was posted on Schoology, and when I completed assignments, my mom submitted them.*

*My mom did not have to help me much. She worked with my younger brother. We were all happy when school was over. The pandemic made us very sad, and we were scared because we weren't sure if going outside was safe anymore. That summer, we stayed indoors most of the time. I read a lot of books during that summer because I wanted to be ready for the fourth grade and I wanted to do well.*

*Fourth grade was different from third grade, and I wasn't scared to return to school that year. My mom had an opportunity to choose between face- to- face or online school. She asked me what I wanted, and I told her face- to- face. Most kids were online, so I only had few students*

*in my classroom. We didn't switch classes. Our teachers came to us. We stayed in the same room all day. We went outside for recess. We could take off our masks, but we couldn't touch each other or be very close to each other.*

*I was still doing well in all my classes. I made some C's sometimes, but I was no longer fearful of repeating another grade. Whenever I got a low grade, I would work very hard and the next time around, I would always make a better grade. The teachers were great, and they treated me well. Whenever I didn't understand something, I asked for help, and I was given the help that I needed to be successful. I was enjoying school again, but I will never forget the year that I was retained.*

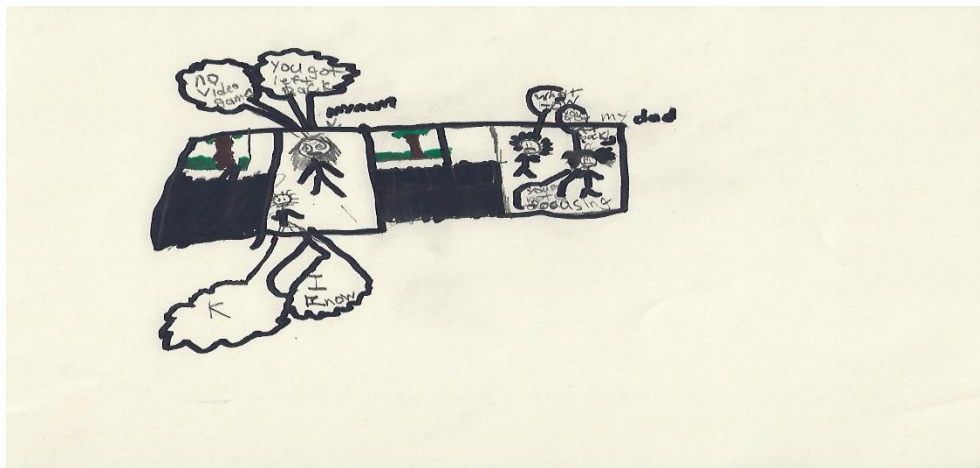
*I did the FSA in fourth grade, and I received a level three. I was just 5 points away from a level four. It was my writing. I struggled a little with writing, but I continued to work very hard. I was proud of my grade. This grade proved that I wasn't dumb, and they should never have made me repeat the third grade. I am now in fifth grade and my goal is to make a level five on the FSA. I am working on my writing, and I am making good grades on that. We just started to write weekly, and each week I am improving. I just made the honor roll for the first quarter, and I know that I will continue to do well.*

*My experience as a student who was retained is a mixed one. I am still angry that I was retained because I don't think that I should have had to stay back in third grade because I failed one test. All the teachers knew why I missed school. Sometimes, I think that I was punished for my dad's death. I know I missed a lot of school, but I know that I could have caught up with my classmates over time. I lost many friends because I was retained. I lost confidence in myself because at one time I felt like I was dumb.*

*On the other hand, repeating the grade gave me back my confidence and I was able to prove to everyone that I am a smart boy. Now I make the honor roll and that makes me feel so good. I know that I will continue to work hard because I don't want to disappoint my mom. She doesn't smile much since my dad passed, but whenever my brother and I do well in school she is very happy. Repeating a grade didn't destroy me, but I will always remember that I was retained in the third grade because I didn't pass the FSA.*

### **Henry**

*Summer was coming to an end, and you may never believe this, but I was excited to go back to school. I was mad that I was going back into the third grade but being at home was like living in prison. I did not get back my phone or my game system and my mom took away my tv. I had nothing in my room but my bed. I was only allowed to watch TV with my mom or an adult in the house. My mom yelled at me two days before school, saying, "You are taking your school life for a joke; we have given you everything and you won't even try to do your best in school. You had a second chance in summer school, and you blew it, so until you decide to do better in school, you will lose all your privileges."*



**Figure 8.** Henry's reflections on his parents' reaction to his retention



*Third grade was a nightmare as I expected. I got back the same reading teacher but a different math teacher. My mom wasn't happy that I was having the same reading teacher. I didn't get any help the last time around so I knew deep down that I would not be getting the help that I needed to be successful. All I kept thinking was what did I do to deserve this. I was sailing in bad luck, and I was doom. I would never be getting back my phone, my game system, my TV because I was never going to pass reading again. I was angry but I didn't cry. I was going to face this problem head on and maybe I would come out the winner.*

*Things weren't getting better with my schoolwork, and it seemed like I was losing everything. I could not play sports because of my grades. My parents said that I needed to focus on my schoolwork instead of sports. I couldn't get a break, and no one was listening to me. I was screaming inside, and no one was hearing me. I had no one to talk to because everyone was thinking that I wasn't trying my best with my classwork. I knew my grades were bad, but I needed help to do better, and things were still the same as the last school year.*

*The work was the same, but that didn't make it easier for me. I remembered most of the math and I did better in math class, but I was having such a hard time in reading. The teacher kept yelling at me to focus and do better. I was disappointed in myself, and I felt like a total failure. Whenever my teacher asked me a question and I didn't know the answer, I just felt as if everyone was thinking that I was dumb. I hated school as much as I hated home. School was my prison, and I was trapped. In my head I saw my reading teacher laughing at me and thinking that I was a total failure.*

*I didn't have many friends in my class. I didn't try to talk to them because they were mean. They were always saying things that would get me upset. They made me feel as if I was a dummy.*



**Figure 9.** Henry's view about school

*One day Trayvon (pseudonym) a boy in my class asked me if I was slow (stupid). I was mad and I hit him. I was suspended for one day because I was not allowed to hit anyone not even if they said mean things to me. I was punished at home, but my mom did not tell my dad. He would have been disappointed in me, and I don't like when my dad is upset with me.*

*I didn't see or talk to any of my old friends. I was afraid to go to the bathroom because I didn't want to run into any of them. I knew that they would laugh at me, and I was too embarrassed to face them. Whenever I was in the hallway, and if I saw anyone from my class last year, I would turn around and walk in the other direction. That was how scared I had become because I feared they would mock me. I used to battle with many of them on my game system but that was taken away from me since summer so I was not sure if they would want to still battle with me.*

*After Spring Break, we didn't return to school because COVID caused all schools to close. I now had to do school online. It was so hard for me because I was on my own to do everything. My mom worked in health care so she couldn't work from home. My grandmother didn't understand anything about my schoolwork. Sometimes I went on Zoom, and I turned off my camera and I didn't do any work. My teachers never called on me, so I didn't make any*

*effort to participate. We just went online for attendance; few lessons were taught, and we had to complete our work and submit it. I didn't submit any work and I got all zeros. The teachers sent my mom an email and again I got in trouble, big, big trouble.*

*I wasn't motivated, and even though I tried, sometimes I couldn't do well. I made up in my mind that I was a failure, and I wasn't going to succeed. I failed kindergarten, I failed third grade, and I thought that I would fail it again. If I struggled face- to- face, what made anyone think that I would be successful online? My teachers knew that I repeated the third grade, and they didn't offer any extra help. I think the pandemic made things hard for everyone. We didn't have any FSA. I really didn't care if we took it or not. I wasn't going to pass it anyway. School ended and for the first time in my school life I wasn't going to attend summer school. It felt like freedom, but my freedom was short lived.*

*Mom decided that because I didn't do most of my work online, she was getting me a tutor so that I could be ready for the fourth grade. "If you were responsible and did what you were supposed to do, this wouldn't have happened" she said. "Mom," I shouted, "that is not fair. I really tried. It's not my fault that I am dumb." "Who said that you were dumb," said Mom. "You are being dramatic. You have always been like that. You don't try. Everything I do to help you, you throw it back into my face. You can go and live with your dad and give him all this headache." I wanted to run away. My mom blamed me for not being smart enough. I tried, I really tried. It was not my fault that I failed and continued to fail. I just needed help.*

*For fourth grade I had to return to school because I could not be trusted to do online school. Some kids were able to stay at home. They Zoomed into the classes every day. There were few students in my class but there were some mean boys in my class. We always got into it, and I always got into trouble. One day when I was sitting in the back finishing my writing, Allen*

*(pseudonym) who was one of the boys who was always messing with me, walked by and kicked my chair. “Dummy” he said to me. I tried to ignore him, and I didn’t tell my teacher. Another day he came by again and called me the same name. This time he said, “You are going to repeat the fourth grade too?”*

*I wanted to fight him, but I didn’t. I played it cool. I was so angry, and I told my mom what happened. She called the school and spoke with my teacher. I was always going to be a target because I failed the third grade. I was doing my best in fourth grade, and I was getting some help from my teachers. In fourth grade I had to do writing exam, so every day I had to write. I struggled in writing. I couldn’t write more than a paragraph. School life was getting to me. The harder I tried the harder it was for me.*

*It wasn’t getting easier for me, and I didn’t want to live anymore. I was being pressured at home and school. This added stress to my life. I planned to go by the bridge and jumped off. I didn’t tell anyone. I had it all planned out in my head and I was going to do it. I was just waiting for the right day to do it. I was hurting and no one really cared for me, so I wanted to end it all. One day a police officer came to school to talk about bullying. He asked many questions and the kids answered. Then he asked, “What should you do if you were being bullied?” I answered, saying, “Nothing, because no one will believe you and like me, you just feel like you don’t want to live anymore.”*

*I think I shocked everyone, and I was immediately taken to the principal’s office. They were kind to me and asked me if I wanted to talk more about what I shared. I told them how hard school was for me, and that I was being bullied because I repeated the third grade. They told me that they had to call my parents because what I said was very serious and they didn’t*

want me to carry out my plan. My parents came immediately. I was placed in another room while the principal and the police officer spoke with my parents.

I had to go home. My dad was mad at me. He said that I was seeking attention. I didn't say anything to him. My mom did not say anything when we were in the car. When we got home, she told me that she was going to take me to see someone. The police had given her some information and I had to see someone immediately. I spoke with the counselor, and it was the first time that someone was listening to me without yelling and arguing with me. I was able to see the counselor twice weekly. The counselor advised my parents and my school that I should take part in after school sports as this would help me. I was the happiest when I was playing sports and I was really good at it. Whenever I played sports, I felt free. Finally, there was something that I was good at and that made me happy.

I did the FSA in fourth grade, and I wasn't surprised that I failed the reading again. However, this time, no one was talking about me repeating the fourth grade. My mom didn't say anything. I think that she was tired of yelling at me or maybe she finally saw that I needed some help. My mom sent me to my dad that summer. She said that I needed to learn some form of trade since I didn't decide to take to books. My dad is a mechanic. He showed me how to work on cars. At the end of that summer, I was able to change tires and do oil change. I also washed cars during the summer and made some money.

Repeating the third grade affected my entire family. I was always angry, and because of this my mom and I fought every day. This made life uncomfortable for my little sister. She needed help too, but most of the time, my mom was trying to figure out how to help me. My dad did not like that I had to repeat the grade. He told me that the school system was built to destroy the minds of young Black boys. He didn't like my school because he didn't think they helped me

*to succeed. He said that I had it in me to do well and one day things would be better for me. My sister knew that I was retained, but that didn't mean anything to her. She never spoke to me about school. I just felt bad that mom and I would always argue, and she would go to her room and be by herself.*

*There is nothing positive about being retained. Repeating the third grade destroyed my life. I felt worthless, and I struggled to keep friends. I lost all the friends that I made before I repeated the third grade. I was the constant target of bullies, and my life was miserable. I lost my freedom. Everything that I owned was taken from me. I could not play games; I could not have my phone; and all my free time was taken away. My mom was always angry at me because she thought that I didn't care or try my best. I live in constant fear of everything and everyone. My best was never good enough. I was stressed from being pressured at home and at school. I knew that I needed help in school, but my school life should not be based on tests. I didn't deserve to repeat the third grade. No one should ever have to go through this. It is just not fair.*

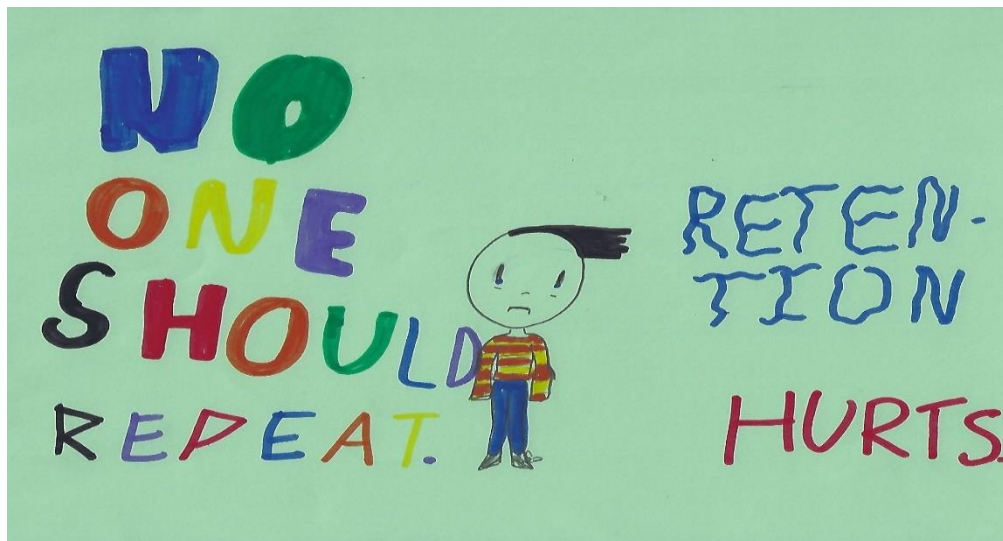
### **Current Views About Retention**

#### **Sean**

*I don't think that retention is good for anyone. I know that I struggled when I just entered the third grade, but this was because third grade was harder than all the other grades. Kids should not have to repeat the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade just because they don't understand the work. School is a place where students are taught. If students are not taught properly then it is not their fault, and they should not have to repeat grades.*

*I asked for help many times and I did not get it. Whenever I didn't understand something, my teacher told me to go and read the directions and try harder because it was independent work. Retention took away my freedom and this should not have happened because*

*I am just a kid. I could not play sports because I had low grades and I was always attending tutoring. I had to stay at school for long hours. I think retention is abuse because I lost my friends and my self-confidence, and I am behind an entire year. No matter how hard I work, I will never get back the year that I lost. My question to my teacher is, “Why didn’t you help me?”*



**Figure 10.** Sean’s current view about retention

*I am now in the fifth grade and things are much better for me. My parents make sure that I get all the extra help that I need. I still live in fear sometimes whenever I failed a test, or my scores are not high enough that I will repeat the grade. I don’t talk to anyone about this fear because I am still embarrassed that I failed the third grade. That feeling of failure and embarrassment will live with me forever.*

*I do get to play sports and enjoy life as a kid. I haven’t been back to summer school since I failed the third grade, but I still get tutoring. I have new friends who I hang out with. I never see the old friends again as they are now in another building. Retention hurts because I have lost those friends for life. No one should ever repeat a grade. When I grow up, I am going*

*to be a teacher and I will help students with their reading, especially boys and girls who look like me.*

### **Harry**

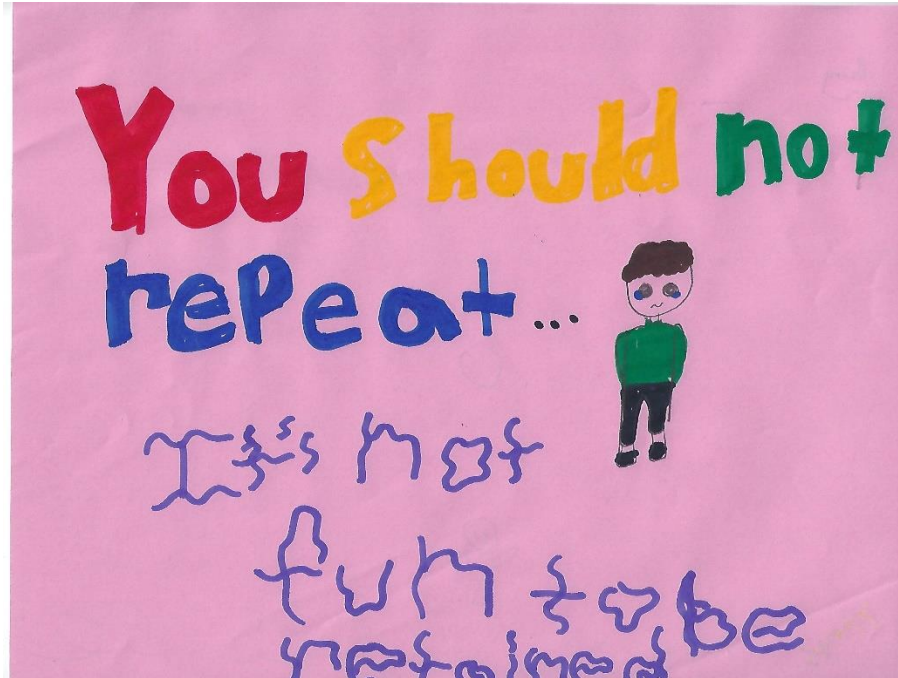
*Everyone knows that repeating a grade is the worse experience ever. Or maybe one doesn't know how bad it is until he has to repeat a grade. Retention is bad. No one should ever have to do a grade two times. If a student is not very smart, I think a teacher should help him understand the work. Retention destroys one's life forever. No kid should ever live in fear all because of retention. It is just a nightmare.*

*Retention is bad because it destroys one's life forever. Think about it like this, every time I go to school it brings back memories that in this school, I had to stay back a grade. Do you know how stressful that is? I don't think the teachers know how stressful it is; that is why they make kids who are not very smart repeat a grade. Repeating a grade has done more damaged to me than anything else in my life. I have lost my voice because I live in constant fear that someone is going to find out that I repeated a grade and make fun of me*

*I think that they should ban retention forever. If I had the opportunity to talk to my teacher about retention I would ask, "Why?" Students sometimes don't do well in some subjects but that does not make them dumb. Staying back an entire year doesn't make them any smarter. I wasn't any smarter because I still didn't get any help. Repeating a grade is just a waste of time. You know what is sad about retention? You will never ever get back that time.*

*I am now in the fifth grade, and I am doing what I need to do to be successful. I get more help from the teachers in this grade than the other teachers in previous grades. I get pulled by a co-teacher daily and she helps me with my reading. I am doing much better now.*





**Figure 11.** Harry's current view about retention

*I am more mature now, so I have to be responsible for my schoolwork. I try to do my best and sometimes I ask for help. I do a lot more group work, so I talk to my classmates, but not very much. I am quiet during lunchtime, and I have a choice to stay in or go outside during recess. I always stay inside during recess.*

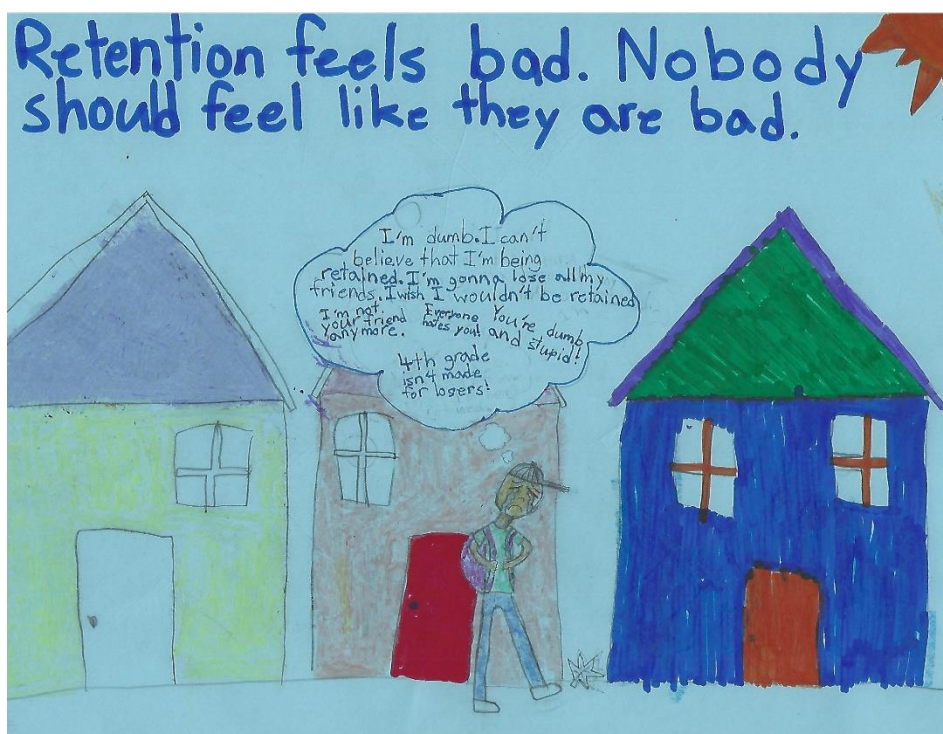
*My feeling about school remains the same. School remains a dark place for me. I feel free whenever I leave this building. I still do tests. I have more tests in the fifth grade than any other grades. My school life is filled with tests. I am always doing tests. That is the reason why school has remained a prison for me. I am never given the opportunity to be a kid and enjoy school. I always have to test and that makes me unhappy. I hope that one day that I will love school again but for now, I just attend because I have to.*

### **James**

*I have mixed feelings when it comes to retention. It is not good, but it is not 100% bad either. I think if retention is going to help a student, then he should be retained. The student will*

*feel bad at first, but after a while, if he works hard then he will be okay. I was embarrassed and upset that I had to repeat the third grade. I was away from school for three months because my dad was sick and then he passed away. I think that it was unfair that I had to go to summer school and then go back in the third grade for 10 more months. That was not an even exchange, three months for 10 months of my life. I will always remember how unfair that was.*

*Retention was good for me because I had an opportunity to prove that my teachers were wrong. If my dad hadn't passed away, I would have continued to make A's and B's. I received low grades because I missed most of the lessons and I was sad inside and didn't care much about school or anything, so I didn't do any work. I don't think that I should have to prove my teachers wrong. They should have helped me and done everything in their power to let me go to the fourth grade.*



**Figure 12.** James' current view about retention

*Retention makes you feel bad, and no one should ever be made to feel bad. You have that pain inside your chest that you cannot explain to anyone. It hurts every time that you think that you were left behind. It's like playing during recess time and you always get picked last for a team. You feel like you don't matter, or you are not good enough. That is how retention makes me feel. I am happy that I was able to make good grades and regained my confidence, but retention still hurts. My advice to all teachers would be that they should not be quick to retain a student but to help that student to pass the grade the first time around. If they have to retain a student, then they should work extra hard to make sure that the student feels special and doesn't feel like a failure.*

*I am now in the fifth grade, and I am enjoying my school life once again. I love my teachers. I have three teachers, and much more is expected of me, but I am doing well. I have to set a good example for my younger brother. Since dad is not around, I have to help him with everything. I want him to see me succeed and know that he can be successful too. I never want my brother to repeat a grade.*

*I recently signed up for flag football because mom thinks that I need to be involved in sports like I used to. I have the opportunity to be a kid again. I don't have to do tutoring again, but I continue to study and work hard. I am not worried about having to repeat another grade. That will never happen to me again. Retention is scary and leaves you with some bad feelings, but it can also give you the opportunity to learn the things that you missed and be successful.*

### **Henry**

*Retention is the worst thing that could ever happen to any kid. I think that they should ban retention because no student should have to repeat a grade. It causes insecurities, and like me you are isolated and feel like you are less than a human being. Retention takes away your*

*freedom to be normal. It makes you feel as if you are stupid or something like that. It makes you a target for the bullies in school. Whenever other kids know that you repeated a grade, they think that you are slow and not smart.*

*My life has changed ever since I repeated the third grade. Retention let you live in constant fear, and it makes you feel that you are not smart enough and you will never be successful in life. No kid should ever repeat a grade. It destroys you mentally and emotionally. Can you imagine going to school and having kids mock you and call you bad names? That is what retention does. When you repeat a grade, it feels like your heart is cut wide open and someone keeps beating on the inside. The pain is always there no matter how hard you try to forget it.*



**Figure 13.** Henry's current view about retention

*Retention can be likened to prison. You are trapped in your head all the time, thinking how bad you are and what others are thinking about you. It makes school feel like a prison each*

*day. Retention also takes away your freedom of being a kid and doing fun stuff. When I repeated the third grade, the first thing that was taken away from me was my game system. That's the only thing that a kid enjoys, and to have that removed because he is repeating a grade is the worst thing ever.*

*I think the teacher who came up with the idea to have students repeat a grade has never repeated a grade. If that teacher repeated a grade, she would know how hard it is for students. If I had the opportunity to talk to my teacher about retention, I would have a lot to say. First, I would tell her that she had no right to make me repeat a grade because when I needed help, she did not help me. I would tell her that I am just a kid, and I didn't deserve all the bad things that happened to me and are still happening to me. I would let her know that because I repeated a grade, I hate school and I have lost so much. The biggest loss I have is losing myself. I don't think I am important, and I always think that I am a failure.*

*I am now in the fifth grade and life isn't any easier for me. I am in the ESE (Exceptional Student Education) program. I get assistance with my schoolwork. I am given extended time on all my tests. I still get in trouble at times because some boys are always messing with me. They often called me stupid whenever the teacher is not looking, and then I get mad and fight back. I see the school counselor three times a week and my other counselor twice weekly.*

*My life has not been easy. I am old enough to make better choices and I know that. However, I don't like school and whenever I am here, I am so angry. I don't try to be angry. I really don't, but when you can't learn as quickly as the other kids it makes you feel defeated. I try really hard, but I still struggle. My parents have already decided that I will be going to a trade school. I am going to be a mechanic and you know what, I am going to be the best*

*mechanic ever. I am going to show all these teachers that I can be good at something apart from playing sports. Retention is never a good option for any kid, and it must be stopped.*

## **Conclusion**

Findings from the data collection and analysis of the study were presented in this chapter. The lived experiences of the participants who were retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law were shared through narrative. To begin, I provided a participant description narrative for each participant, providing their background, and outlining the experiences they encountered that led to their retention in the third grade. These were followed by narratives that detailed each participant's lived experiences as students who were retained. The final narrative described where they are now and how the participants view retention. The narratives were accompanied by their artistic representations they created to help convey their message. In Chapter 6, implications for teachers, schools, administrators, and policy makers will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 5: THEMES**

### **Themes Derived from The Findings Through Cross-case synthesis**

This chapter describes how I discovered themes from the findings through cross-case synthesis. I conducted a multiple case study and to be effective, cross-case synthesis was completed. I coded each student's data separately and then coded across them. I coded all round one interviews, then round two and finally round three interviews. Each student's information was written as a separate case once I synthesized the data. As I synthesized the data, I noticed similar patterns across all four participants. Those patterns were further analyzed, and the following four themes emerged.

1. Hispanic and African American boys experience neglect in the classroom.
2. Hispanic and African American boys experienced emotional trauma.
3. Hispanic and African American boys lost friends because of retention.
4. Hispanic and African American boys felt that their freedom as a kid was taken away.

#### **Hispanic and African American boys experience neglect in the classroom**

When the four participants went into third grade, they realized that life was different from what it was in the second grade. In the second grade they were given a homework package to complete and turn it in at the end of the week. However, in the third grade they had to complete homework nightly and they now had computer-based homework that had to be completed nightly. The workload was overwhelming, and all participants became frustrated. The workload in the classroom was getting to them also and they began to struggle.

The participants shared that when they reached out for help, they were neglected and told to work harder. “Read the instructions,” Sean shared when he asked for help. Harry shared that when he reached out for help the teacher looked at him and said, “Seriously, what were you doing while I was teaching?” Sean shared that he was listening, but his teaching was going over the lesson too fast and he just did not understand. Sean was doing well in school. However, he lost his dad and missed school for a while. When he returned, he began to struggle. Sean shared that when he needed help to get caught up his teacher did not help much. “Sean, this is independent work, you have to answer this on your own.” Sean stated that he only needed a little help, but the teacher did not.

Henry struggled in reading, and he shared that he did not understand anything that the teacher was teaching. He said that one day after the teacher finished teaching, he asked if he could come to the small table for help. He shared her response, “You keep giving me a hard time and then asking me for help.” He said, “I wasn’t giving her a hard time, I was having a hard time.” The narratives showed that all four participants reached out for help, and they were neglected. This neglect contributed to their struggles and later to their retention.

### **Hispanic and African American boys experienced emotional trauma.**

The narratives showed that the four participants experienced emotional trauma because they were retained. They all used the exact words to describe their feelings. “I feel dumb and stupid. I am embarrassed because I have to repeat the third grade” is what Sean conveyed. Harry’s words were similar to that of Sean: “I have these thoughts in my head that I am dumb and stupid.” James thought he should never have repeated the third grade. “I know that I am smart, but I have this constant thought that I am so stupid” was what Sean expressed. Henry



shared that he was not smart, but he should never be made to repeat the grade: “I hear this voice in my head telling me that I am stupid, dumb, worthless and deserve to die.”

The narratives showed that although these participants were never told these words directly, they were constant feelings that they embraced, and those words were constantly playing in their heads. This emotional trauma caused all four participants to encounter behaviors that were not normal for nine-year-old. Sean said, “I started to misbehave in class because I was mad and felt embarrassed.” “I stopped talking, because I was so embarrassed, and I thought if I spoke people would find out and laugh at me” shared Harry. James said, “I was so embarrassed that I repeated the third grade, and I would stand by my window and cry and tell my dad how much I missed him.” Henry shared he had constant fight with his parents and teachers. “I was embarrassed that I failed the grade and each day they keep telling me that I was not trying hard enough. I couldn’t take that pressure, so I talk back at home, and I get it fight at school all the time.” The narratives showed that the emotional trauma that the four participants experienced because of retention.

### **Hispanic and African American boys lost friends because they were retained.**

One of the biggest losses for the four participants was losing their friends. All four participants shared that they lost their close friends because their friends were promoted to the next grade, and they were retained. They all shared that their friends did not play with them as they used to and that made them feel sad. Sean shared: “I missed my old friends though. Life was not the same. Sometimes I would see some of them when I went to the restroom. They said hi but they never stopped and talked to me like we used to talk when we were in the same grade. We used to play a game named Prodigy. They unfriended me so I didn’t have anyone to battle.” Harry shared that his friends no longer spoke with him, and he was okay with that: “I lost all my

friends that I had when I was in the third grade the first time. I saw them in the hallway, but I hid each time or held my head down so they wouldn't talk to me." James said that he did not lose all his friends, but he no longer hung out or played with most of them.: "I still have one close friends, but most of them don't talk to me anymore. I think they feel sorry for me though, but I am fine." Henry lost all he friends. He said that they were in a different grade and did not want to be bothered with a third grader. "I didn't see or talk to my old friends. I was afraid to go to the bathroom because I didn't want to run into any of them. I knew they would laugh at me, and I was too embarrassed to face them."

The four participants felt that their old friends did not want to be seen with them because they were back in the third grade Sean, Henry, and James all shared that their old friends had new friends and did not want to be seen with a third grader. Harry echoed the following, "I know that they don't want to talk to be because I am in third grade, and I don't want to talk to them either because I don't want anyone to laugh at me." The four participants shared that they were hurt because they lost their friends. However, they were now okay because they made new friends. The only thing that they regret was that they had to lose all their friends in the first place.

**Hispanic and African American boys felt that their freedom as a kid was taken away.**

All four participants shared that they lost their freedom because they were retained. They had to go to summer school, and they were not given the opportunity to have fun during the summer. Sean said, "All the kids in the neighborhood and my sister get to stay home while I had to go to summer school. That is not fair. I should not have all my summer taken." Harry was so mad that he had to go to summer school because the teachers already made the decision that he

would be retained and attending summer school would not help him. “They already made up their mind that I was not going to summer school. They took away the only freedom that I had, and they still were not going to let me go to the fourth grade. That was so dope.” James was sad that he had to repeat and constantly share how unfair it was. “I didn’t deserve to repeat that grade,” he said. “I lost my dad and now they punished me by taking away my freedom because I was grieving for my dad.” According to Henry, he lost everything. “They took away my game system, my tv and my phone. They took away my freedom. Remember when I told you that school was a prison? Yes, it was, and I was their prisoner. I was a kid and they just treated me like a criminal because I did not pass that stupid test.”

All four participants shared how they were not allowed to play games after school. The school had a policy that if students were failing any classes, they were not allowed to be involved in any extra -curricular activities. All four participants were denied this opportunity and they all shared that they loved sports and were good at it. The narratives showed that because the four participants failed the reading FSA and had to be retained, they lost the opportunity to enjoy their summer that year and they were devastated about losing their summer to attend summer school. Narratives also showed that they felt that taking away their extracurricular after school also took away their freedom from being a kid.

## **Conclusion**

This study is a case study that is merged with narrative inquiry. In this chapter I highlighted the four themes that were discovered after conducting cross-case synthesis. The themes were accompanied with evidence which are the direct quotes from the participants. In this chapter with saw the similarities of the experiences that all four participants encountered.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

As an educator for over twenty-seven years, I have become immensely aware that students who are retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law face countless challenges, some of which have contributed to negative stigmas related to retention. It is this awareness that has guided me to seek information on the lived experiences of Hispanics and African American boys who were retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law. In Chapter 4, I presented the lived experiences and viewpoints of Sean, Harry, James, and Henry regarding retention. These students were purposefully selected based on a set of criteria to provide an in-depth perspective on the lived experiences of Hispanics and African American boys who were retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law.

Through interviews and art drawings, the four participants who were retained reflected on their experiences in school. Throughout the twelve interview sessions, the participants shared their experiences and provided drawings to help others understand the challenges that they encountered. Throughout this process, I used a reflexive journal to record my thoughts and what happened during the interview sessions. This reflexive journal allowed me to reflect on what was shared by my participants. I also used this journal to improve on questions that would be used in upcoming sessions based on what happened in previous sessions.

The findings from this study were derived from the experiences of the four participants and are extremely important to consider as we think about executing future supports, policies, and practices for students who have been retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law.

As previously discovered during literature review, researchers who are strong opponents of retention concluded that elementary students who were retained suffered lower self-esteem and viewed retention as a punishment and a stigma; they did not view being retained as a positive event that would help them in the long term. These researchers argued that at no time should retention be implemented as it does harm to students' social emotional outcomes, and this harm remains with them as they become adults.

This qualitative multiple case study uses narrative inquiry to evoke pivotal accounts that depicts the perceptions of retained students. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience about retention?
2. What insights can the stories of Black and Hispanic males who have been retained provide us about the inequalities they face?

### **Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework informing this study is critical race theory. Solórzano (2020) defines critical race theory as the work of scholars who are attempting to develop an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education. According to Solórzano (2020), these scholars work towards identifying and challenging all forms of subordination. Rollock and Gillborn (2011) defines critical race theory as an approach that offers a radical lens through which to understand and challenge racial inequality in society. Ladson-Billings (1998) states that critical race theory begins with the notion that racism is normal in American society.

Derrick Bell, who is considered the father of critical race theory wrote five tenets. I used the modified version of the tenets that was written by Ladson-Billings since her work focused on education and the inequity in the school system. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), one of

the civil rights legal battles is “equal opportunity” in schools. They believe that all students of color should have access to the same opportunities as White students: these opportunities include curriculum, instruction, funding, facilities as (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Using critical race theory as a framework has given me insights into the educational setting through the participants’ perceptions. It is through the participants’ lived experiences that critical race theory has become evident. I used the following modified tenets of critical race theory to steer me during the analysis process and gain deeper insight (Ladson-Billings, 1998):

1. Racism is not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly; however, racism is the normal order of things in U.S. society.
2. White people will seek racial justice only if there is something in it for them. In other words, interest convergence is about alignment, not altruism.
3. Race is not a scientific reality. Humans have constructed social categories and organizations that rely heavily on arbitrary genetic differences like skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and lip size.
4. Race has been such a flashpoint in America, we almost believe that our challenges stem solely from racial injustice and believe that all people perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways
5. There is a tradition of storytelling in law and litigation that is highly formalized; the stories of ordinary people, in general, have not been told; stories reflect a perspective and underscore the teller, audience, society and those who are in power.

The notion that racism is not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly, but the normal order of things in U.S. society became evident in the narratives of Sean, Harry, James, and Henry. All four students shared how they were ignored several times when they

asked for help. At 11 years old, they realized that they were treated differently. They also realized that much help was not offered, and when help was offered, they were left alone to discover answers for themselves, even though it was known that they were students who struggled. Harry and Henry felt that their teachers were racist. They heard it from their parents, and they both felt that they were treated the way they were simply because they were Black.

All four participants shared how differently they were treated by African American teachers. Harry shared his experience while at summer school. He shared that whenever he needed help with words that he did not know he was given such help. He shared how proud he was that through guided help, he was able to read better. This help was not given to him during the school year from his reading teacher who was Caucasian. The participants' stories shone light on what Bell (1992) believes: that racism is a permanent fixture of American life.

Therefore, it is important that one unmask and expose racism in its various permutations.

White people will seek racial justice only if there is something in it for them. In other words, interest convergence is about alignment, not altruism. One of the mission statements of the school where the four participants attend is as follows: "Unwavering commitment to the students' success at school and in their lives." The school also brags about its "diverse population" and often uses this term to attract new students. The stakeholders realize that they would lose more than prominence if they were perceived as unwelcoming to Black and Brown students. These students bring in needed funds that continue to line the pockets of this for-profit institution. These students are welcomed within this institution; however, in the narratives of the four participants, inequity was obvious, and these participants suffered the consequences.

The four participants shared how they struggled academically; at no time did their teachers change their methodology to accommodate their style of learning. From the narratives

shared, it appears that there was a one size fit all education system; no differentiation was evident. Harry shared how he constantly sought help because he did not understand the materials presented. As a result of him seeking help, the teacher contacted his mom sharing he was giving her a hard time. Harry shared that he was not giving her a hard time, instead, he was the one having a hard time. Through the narratives of the four participants, it is obvious that the institution's claims of offering unwavering commitment to student success, at school and in their lives, is a camouflage for self - interest, power, and privilege.

Race is not a scientific reality. Humans have constructed social categories and organization that rely heavily on arbitrary genetic differences like skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and lip size. Race as an idea continues to have a wide range of effects with respect to educational outcomes and this has contributed to how these participants were treated in the school system. It has long been believed that Black and Brown people are lazy. The narratives of the four participants shone light on what the teachers thought about them. These participants struggled academically, and instead of receiving the help that was needed to be successful, they were often told that they were not trying hard enough.

Even though race is a social construct, over the years it has had real, tangible effects on Black and Brown people, especially in the school system. According to the education system's policy, whenever a student is retained because of the Florida mandatory retention law, they are required to get extra service from teachers who are reading endorsed, and they should be pulled daily to get one- on- one service from those teachers. The participants shared that they were never given extra help to be successful the second time around. They shared that as in previous year when they were not given extra help, they still did not receive extra help to be successful.



One of the participants, Henry, shared that he had the same teacher as the previous school year, which should never have occurred.

Social construction played a part in the way these participants were treated. Critical race theorists accept the scientific understanding that there is no -race, or no genetic difference; however, they also accept the power of social reality that allows significant disparities in the life chances of people based on the categorical understanding of race (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Race has been such a flashpoint in America, we almost believe that our challenges stem solely from racial injustice and believe that all people perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways. It was no surprise that the four participants' treatment within the classroom was similar. They even had similar words spoken to them, words such as "you are not trying hard enough," or "go and read your instructions and complete the assignment." The behavior of the teachers implied that the students were lazy, and that they were not giving the assignment their best effort. These participants being African American and Hispanic, were grouped under one umbrella, and their academic needs were not met, simply because of who they were. At one point, Sean, who is a Hispanic told that the reason he struggled in reading class was because English was not his first language. Sean being Hispanic, it was believed that he spoke Spanish and that English was his second language. Sean shared that he did not speak Spanish fluently and that English was his first language.

It is safe to conclude that the participants encountered the challenges they did because society sees a particular group of people, specifically Black and Hispanic males, as troublemakers who had no intention to succeed academically. This was evident when the participants were never given extra help to be successful. All participants shared that they were offered tutoring, yet they were never given one – to - one attention. Instead, all four participants

shared that they were placed on a program that they did not understand, and much help was not offered. The belief that all people perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways impacted the lives of the four participants, and their unmet needs were never addressed.

There is a tradition of storytelling in law and litigation is highly formalized; the stories of ordinary people, in general, have not been told; stories reflect a perspective and underscore the teller, audience, society, and those who are in power. The voice of the participants was often silenced by people in authority. Harry stated that he often shared how he was treated in the classroom: however, his cry for help fell on deaf ears. It was not until Harry was being retained that his mom apologized for not acting earlier and not believing his story. As a result of this, Harry became silent. He felt that there was no need to speak because no one believed him.

The stories of the four participants have never been told until now. It is important that power is given to their voices. Allowing their stories to be heard fights against the dominant narratives that lacks the truth that minority individuals experience because of retention. The four participants' experiences varied; however, they all felt hurt and shame and through their experiences one could clearly see how the system failed them. Their narratives are not being told to vent, or rant, or be an exhibitionist regarding one's own racial struggle. Their narratives are told to share their experiences with the hope that changes can occur in relation to retention.

In conclusion, the narratives of the participants brought to light the relationship that exists between critical race theory and the education system. Through the lens of critical race theory, the lived experiences of Sean, Harry, James, and Henry showed that a system was already established to fail them. Ladson-Billings (1998) contends that critical race theorists see the official school curriculum as a "culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White

supremacist master script.” She further argues that this master scripting means stories of African American, and Hispanics are “muted and erased when they challenge dominant culture authority and power” (Ladson -Billings, 1998).

### **Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature**

When reflecting upon the literature and data as it relates to retention, it is important to shine light on the similarity of the findings in this study. The findings showed that problems that existed over many years are still prevalent in the school system today. Researchers in the educational field from the United States and neighboring countries have argued that allowing low - performing students to repeat a grade is not only ineffective educational practice but damaging to the students. The narratives of Sean, Harry, James, and Henry mirror this statement.

Findings from this study demonstrate that students who have been retained because of Florida’s mandatory retention law are students from minority families. Hispanics and African American boys experience inequity in elementary school. The lived experiences of the participants show that retention alone is ineffective in raising student achievement. Experiences shared by the participants highlighted how retention lowered their self-esteem and even affected the peer -relationships. The findings show that test-based policies were ineffective and did more harm than good for the participants. Each of these findings are discussed in more detail in relation to the literature below.

### **Hispanics and African American boys experience inequity in elementary school**

Looking back at information gathered through the literature review reveals that many other researchers have also argued that retention occurs because of inequities in education. Milner (2010) argued that schools can structurally produce and perpetuate inequity, poverty, and

cultures of apathy while pretending to be designed to do the opposite. The narratives of Sean, Harry, James, and Henry, clearly depicts inequity in the school. All four participants shared how they struggled in school. They realized that they needed help and reached out to the educators for help, but sufficient help was never given. Sean shared that he repeatedly asked for help, but he was told to try harder. Harry was flagged as a mischievous student when he kept asking for help because he did not understand the materials that were given to him to complete. James shared that he was often placed in programs instead of being given one-on-one assistance for lessons he did not understand. Henry, who struggled the most academically, had extremely reading skills. He repeated kindergarten because of this problem. When he was in the third and fourth grades, he still struggled; however, adequate service was never provided to help him to succeed.

This flawed education system has caused more students of color and Hispanic students to be retained at a higher rate in comparison to their white peers (Jamieson, 2016). These inequalities are evident when one looks at the retention rate in schools (Payne, 2008). The participants had to attend summer school because they were retained. When the participants were asked the following question, “How many other students who looked like you were attending summer school that year because they were going to be retained?” their responses were the same. All four participants shared that the students who attended summer school looked like them. Sean said, “There were all boys in my class. I wasn’t sure if there was another class with girls but there were only boys in my room. There were about 13 boys in my class. I don’t remember if there were any white males in my class. There were many Blacks and Hispanic boys.”

Standardized testing in public education has undermined equity and school quality (West, 2019). The four participants were retained because they failed a standardized test, the third grade FSA reading test. They shared how unprepared they were for the test and that constantly hearing about the FSA made them fearful. Henry shared that he does not like taking tests. He stated how stressed taking tests made him feel. He felt that he was always pressured to do well and when he did not, he felt stupid. Standardized testing is unfair because all students were required to take the same test even when they were not performing on the same level. From the narratives of the participants, it was obvious that they struggled academically and were not ready for this test. However, they were given the test, and when they failed to live up to the required standard that was set by school policy, they were further punished with retention.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2021) standardized testing should not be embraced or used as a tool to measure students' success until all students have access to high-quality content that fits their educational needs. They also believe that all students, regardless of the color of their skins or their background, should have highly qualified teachers who are prepared to meet their needs (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2021). Evidence from the participants' narratives showed that they did not receive high quality content to help them be successful. Henry and Harry shared that they believed that their teacher was racist. They both felt that they did not receive the required tools to succeed, simply because they were Black. Sean shared that his teacher said that the reason why he struggled was because he spoke Spanish at home. This statement was untrue, but one could see that the teacher had a different mindset when it came to servicing minority kids. Reasons were affixed to why they were unsuccessful.

Finally, Anderson (2018), a strong opponent of retention believes that if teachers were prepared to work with students from diverse backgrounds, then there would be no need for retention. He argues that all teachers in the classroom should understand inequities at both classroom and societal level (Anderson, 2018). The treatment received by the participants showed that the teachers were not adequately trained to work with diverse students. All students displayed a need for extra help from the get-go. Instead of receiving differentiated lessons that would service the needs of the participants, they were neglected. James suffered a devastating loss. Instead of being reached where he was when he returned to school, he was thrown back into the pack, and it was business as usual. No extra accommodation was provided for him, and he struggled to catch up with his peers. This made him feel like a failure. Sean was often placed in groups with other Hispanics boys and was placed on a computer for extra support. The expert attention of the teacher that was required for him to be successful was not given. Instead, he was placed on a computer program that was often used to teach him. In closing, it is safe to conclude that there are many factors that rationalize inequalities (Sleeter, 2008). These include but not limited to lack of resources, teacher competency, diversity of teachers in the classroom and low teacher expectations (especially for Hispanics and African American boys) (Sleeter, 2008).

### **Retention alone is ineffective in raising student achievement**

Reflecting on the literature that was gathered, overall, most of the 32 research studies show that retention alone is ineffective in raising student achievement. According to one text and six empirical studies, retained students who made gains during the retention year did not experience enough growth to bring them up to the same level as the students who were promoted (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 2003; Anderson & Dalton, 2002; Jimerson et al, 2002; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Schwerdt & West, 2012). This was

confirmed from the narratives of the four participants. All four participants continued to struggle academically and not much gain was made in the year that they were retained. During the fourth quarter of the year that the participants were retained, they had to complete school at home because of a pandemic. The four participants were not able to work independently, and they struggled. Henry struggled the most. He did not understand most of the assignments, so he did not do any work and fell further behind. Sean shared that when he was home, he struggled with the given assignments. It was during that time that his mom realized how far behind he was and how much help he needed to get caught up with his peers.

Literature reviewed showed that growth was short-lived, and this was evident in the following year. All four participants shared that there were times when they received better grades on test in comparison to the previous year. However, life for three of the participants remained the same in the fourth grade. They continued to struggle and when they took the FSA in the fourth grade, all but one gained mastery. Henry was upset when he received a level one which is considered inadequate, but he was not surprised. Sean received a level two which is below satisfactory. Harry also received a level two and James received a level three which is satisfactory. He was five points away from gaining a level four which is proficient. It is evident that the participants did not gain a year's growth as intended by the makers of retention policy.

Alexander et al. (2003) contend that educational researchers have such strong negative opinions about grade retention that they are biased against any evidence which contradicts the view that holding students back a year in grade is a bad practice. James, one of the four participants, was held back because he missed many days of schools and fell behind. James was upset when he found out that he had to repeat the third grade, however, eventually he accepted it. He shared that in the end he had mixed feelings about retention. He felt that because of retention

he was able to learn the materials that he missed, and he was happy that he was now making the honor roll. Retention worked out well for James. After the initial shock, he found himself and continued to succeed academically.

It is unclear whether the participants would have shown growth had they received the right tools to be successful. The narratives of the participants showed that during the year that they were retained, they were not given the extra help that they needed to be successful. According to Florida's school policy, whenever a student is retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law, they should be given extra help to gain academic growth. Resources included are but not limited to extra time for reading class, reading endorsed teachers, small classrooms, and not being placed with the same teacher they had the previous year. This was not evident from the narratives shared by the participants. They were never placed in a small classroom setting, and they complained about not getting the help that they needed to be successful. Henry shared that he received the same teacher as the previous year when he was retained. According to Florida's policy, this should never have happened. The school system failed these participants, and because of this, we saw little or no growth academically from them.

### **Retention lowered their self-esteem and even affected their peer-relationship**

Current literature showed that retention in the elementary school lowered students' self-esteem and even affected peer-relationships (Allen et al., 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Pagani et al., 2001; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). Sean, Harry, James, and Henry shared how they felt about retention. They were able to produce drawings that further depicted their feelings. All four participants felt like they were failures, and they did not want to go to school because of fear that the other students would bully them and call them stupid.



Sean shared how he cried often and wished that he could change to a school where no one would know that he was retained. Harry refused to speak and kept to himself. He was fearful that if he spoke his peers around him would find out that he was retained and would make fun of him. He shared how he was bullied for not talking and was called dumb. James shared that he felt embarrassed and disappointed. He felt like he had failed his dad, who is now deceased. He constantly blamed himself and did not think that he was good enough. Henry was the hardest on himself. His self-esteem was so low that he felt taking his own life would solve the problem. He shared that he felt like a prisoner trapped within a building without escape.

All four participants lost friends. Their friends were now a grade ahead and did not include them in their lives anymore. Sean shared how he missed his old friends: "I missed my old friends though. Life wasn't the same. Sometimes I would see some of them when I went to the restroom. They would say hi, but they never stopped and talked to me like we used to talk when we were in the same grade." Sean also shared that he was no longer included in playing with his old friends on their online games. This made him very sad. Harry shared that he lost all his friends, and he was not interested in making new friends. He shared how dark life was for him at school because he kept to himself and did not talk to anyone. "I lost all my friends that I had when I was in the third grade the first time. I saw them in the hallway, but I hid each time or held my head down so they wouldn't talk to me. I couldn't face my old friends. I was too embarrassed. They knew I was repeating the grade and I couldn't have them laughing at me."

James's experience was different from those the other three participants. He lost some friends but remained friends with others who were in the third grade with him the first time around. "I lost some friends but not everyone. I still had my best friend. He didn't care that I repeated a grade. We were able to hang out sometimes, and he never let me feel differently. We

didn't even talk about school." Henry shared how he lost all his friends. He was scared to go to the bathroom because he did not want to see his old friends. He was scared that they would tease him. "I didn't see or talk to any of my old friends. I was afraid to go to the bathroom because I didn't want to run into any of them. I knew that they would laugh at me, and I was too embarrassed to face them."

The lived experience of the four participants as it relates to low self-esteem and peer relationships align with findings in the existing literature. Jimerson and colleagues, who are strong opponents of retention, concluded that elementary students who were retained suffered lower self-esteem and viewed retention as a punishment and a stigma; they did not consider being retained as a positive event that would help students in the long term. The narratives of the four participants proved their point to be correct.

### **Test-based policies were ineffective and did more harm than good for the participants**

Studies concluded that test-based policies were ineffective, and researchers discovered that after the test-based promotion policy was implemented, the number of Florida third grade students retained increased to 21,799 a 13.5 % jump (Greene & Winters, 2004; Schwerdt & West, 2012). The four participants in this study were retained because of the policy that was implemented in Florida. The policy stated that students who receive a level one on the FSA reading test will be retained.

This retention policy caused more harm than good to the four participants. All participants were devastated when they learned they had to repeat the third grade. Sean's first reaction was total disbelief. He had to attend summer school and he tried his best to pass the alternative test that would make it possible for promotion, but he was sick on that day and was unable to complete the test. Sean said, "For the rest of the summer all I could think about was

repeating the grade. There were times when I didn't eat because I was so sad, and I didn't want to go back to school. I was sad and just wished that school would never open because I did not want to go back into the third grade.

From Harry's narrative, one can clearly see how much harm this policy did to him. Harry was a vibrant student who always asked for help. At times he was flagged as a troublemaker. When he found out he would be retained, he became an introvert and immediately stopped speaking while at school. This behavior continued two years after he was retained. Harry shared, "I became very quiet. I never asked any questions. Whenever the teacher asked me a question I wouldn't answer. The teacher would come and sit beside me and asked me if I was okay and I would nod my head. I felt safer being quiet and I haven't spoken much in class from that time until now."

James felt that the policy that was in place was unfair. He encountered a life changing situation that no one had control over. He shared, "I remember when I went home, I ran straight to my room, and I cried and cried. I couldn't stop crying. I know that I was smart. I wished my dad was here because he would fix everything like he always did. I didn't think that I should repeat third grade." If this policy was not implemented there is no doubt that James would have been promoted. With the Florida mandatory law, many teachers felt that their hands were tied, and they had to do what the state required.

Henry felt like the policy should never have existed. He believed that students should not repeat a grade if the teachers were not doing their jobs to help them to succeed. He expressed his feelings strongly and did not hesitate to use colorful adjectives when he spoke about the test and policy. He felt as though because of one test and policy, his life was changed forever. He shared. "Remember when I told you that the school looked like a prison? Well, I

was definitely a prisoner because I was a kid, and I couldn't have any fun because I failed an absurd test. I was going to repeat the third grade and there wasn't anything that I could do to change that. Life was dark for me." This policy affected the lives of the four participants. One is left to wonder if implementing a policy that affect the lives of students so negatively is worth that risk.

### **Discussion of Themes in Relation to the Literature**

As I analyzed the data, there were four themes that emerged. It is important to compare what was discovered through cross- synthesis to what literature stated. Examining the themes, I discovered that literature reviewed for this study also had similar findings. Findings from the themes demonstrate that Hispanic and African American boys experience neglect in the classroom; Hispanic and African American boys experience emotional trauma; Hispanic and African American boys lost friends because they were retained; and Hispanic and African American boys felt that their freedom as a kid was taken away. Each theme will be discussed in detailed below.

#### **Hispanic and African American boys experience neglect in the classroom**

The four participants shared how they reached out for help and were often neglected by the teacher. They shared that they were encouraged to discover things independently. Literature shows that many students from poor and minority families are at risk because some schools practice sorting paradigm where some students receive high-expectations instructions while the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality future (Karweit, 2000). We clearly saw that these minorities received lower quality education in the classroom.

### **Hispanic and African American boys experience emotional trauma**

The four participants shared how they felt about themselves because they were retained. All four participants used similar words to express how they felt. Four empirical studies concluded that retention in the elementary school lowered students' self-esteem (Allen, Chen, Wilson, & Hughes, 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Pagani, Vitaro, Boulerice & McDuff, 2001; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). One text and two empirical studies concluded that students who are retained become depressed over time (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Hong & Yu, 2008, and Robles, Pina, Defrance & Cox, 2008). Jimerson and colleagues who are strong opponent of retention concluded that elementary students who were retained suffered lower self-esteem and viewed retention as a punishment and a stigma; they did not view being retained a positive event that will help students in the long term. These researchers argued that at no time retention should be implemented as it does harm to students' social emotional outcomes, and this remains with them as they become adults.

### **Hispanic and African American boys lost friends because they were retained**

All four participants shared that they lost most of their friends because they were no longer in the same grade. Three studies found that retention is associated with negative attitudes towards students who were retained. This caused the retained students' emotional distress and acceptance by their peers (Jimerson, 2001; Pagani et al., 2001; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). One text and two empirical studies concluded that students who are retained become depressed over time because of losing valued friendship (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Hong & Yu, 2008, and Robles, Pina, Defrance & Cox, 2008).

### **Hispanic and African American boys felt that their freedom as a kid was taken away**

All four participants were angry when they had to attend summer school. They felt that it was unfair, and they were losing their freedom to be a kid and have fun during the summer.

Summer school is seen as a punishment, a punishment where you are not given any break and instead of resting for two months, students have the added pressure to continue doing schoolwork (Wilson & Hughes, 2009). All students saw attending summer school as a punishment because they failed the reading FSA.

## **Conclusions**

In this study I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of retention. The purpose of this study was to explore how Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience of retention. I also wanted to explore what insights the stories of Black and Hispanic males who have been retained can provide about the inequalities they face.

Sean, Harry, James, and Henry's experiences shine light on what takes place before students are retained. It was obvious that all four participants were mismatched with their teachers and suffered the consequences in the end. The four participants shared their struggles from the beginning, describing how they reached out for help, but it was not given. The classroom that the four participants were placed in seemed to be a one size fit all environment. It is important to bring to light that all four participants had a white teacher the year that they were retained. Evidence from the narratives of the participants showed that little or no interest was given to help them succeed. One could conclude that racism played a role or that the ability to educate minorities require much more work.

The four participants had challenges with reading. One of these participants encountered this challenge after a devastating loss. Yet, at no times were these participants given the extra tool that was needed for success to take place. The participants were often called out for being mischievous and immediately labeled as not giving their best when given assignments to

complete. The environment was not a place where students were seen as individuals with different needs that required different attention.

Culture played a great role in how the participants were treated. The African American participants shared how they were often classified as troublemakers who did not try hard enough. This was common discourse from the teachers throughout their year in the classroom. This is also common discourse in a society presumes that Blacks are often lazy and do not try hard enough. One of the Hispanic participants was categorized as not speaking English as his first language; thus, his ability to excel was perceived to be limited. One must note that there was no truth to this statement because even though the participant's parents spoke Spanish, he did not grasp the language adequately to speak it fluently and understand its content.

The lived experience of these participants showed that retention did more harm than good. When they repeated the grade, not much was offered differently to help them succeed. I should point out, however, that one participant had a Black teacher the following year, and he was able to compare the treatment of the white teacher and the Black teacher. He felt that the Black teacher cared more about his education and as a result he was able to do much better. According to Florida's policy as it pertains to retained students, more help should be given to the students because they were retained. Here the school these participants attended failed them. One clear failure occurred when one participant was placed back in the same classroom with the teacher, he had the year before. According to the policy laid out, this should never have occurred.

The participants felt embarrassed, dumb, and like total failures because they were retained. The losses that they suffered included but was not limited to losing their summer, being stripped of their electronics, losing friends, and experiencing the humiliation of having to

do the grade all over again. At no time did the school system offered emotional support to help them deal with their problems even though some of the participants displayed behavior that was not normal for nine-year-old. Harry completely stopped talking in the classroom. This behavior is not normal and apart from relaying this to his mom, once, nothing else was done. No one found out the root of this problem because Harry shared that he remains like this to this day, and all his teachers have just concluded that he is quiet and there is nothing more to this behavior.

Retention brought additional stress to these participants. All four participants shared how they were pressured to excel because of fear of repeating the same behavior they did the year before. The constant battle for them to succeed academically was evident through their narratives as they were chastised when they did not do well, and incidents of the previous year were also brought up. One of the participants shared how he overheard his parents saying that something was wrong with him that caused him to constantly fail. Henry felt pressure from both parents and teachers to succeed, while the truth behind why he was unsuccessful was never addressed. The stressed that Henry felt pushed him to the brink where he believed that taking his own life was the answer to solve all his problems.

Through the narratives of the four participants, one could clearly see that inequities were center of their lived experiences. The participants' needs were unmet even after they were retained because they failed the FSA reading test. The whole-child focus was never brought into play. Evidence from the narratives showed that the participants were never given hands-on teaching to close the gap. The retention policy clearly states that students who are retained should be given more hands-on learning and one- on- one teaching to foster growth. The students should also be mentored and offered tutoring. The four participants shared that they were offered tutoring; however, the tutoring that they were offered is not what is recommended



by the state when a child is retained. The students were placed on a computer program to help improve their reading skills. At no time should a computer program replace the instructions of a teacher. The school and teachers failed these students. Education is human right which the United States of America has committed to uphold; yet inequality remains dominant in our school system and the four participants suffered because of it.

The pandemic affected the education of the participants in both positive and negative ways. When the participants were forced to complete their education at home during the fourth quarter, it shone light on the difficulties they experienced in school. Only one of the four participants was able to work independently and completed required assignments. Sean's mom realized how much he struggled, and it brought her to tears. She was able to work with him and Sean shared that through the one-on-one explanations that he received, he was able to understand the content and produce better grades. There is no doubt that if the participants were given the tools which are clearly required in Florida's policy manual as it pertains to students who are retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law, they would have been better equipped to work independently when the pandemic occurred. Henry was affected the most because of the pandemic. He did not have the same support at home as the other three participants, and because of this, he struggled with completing the given assignments. He became frustrated and did not do them. This caused him to fall further behind.

There is no doubt that the pandemic caught everyone off guard and to be fair, teachers were doing their best. However, more attention could have been given to the participants. An opportunity was missed by the teachers to work in small groups with these students especially because these participants were retained. They should not have been left to complete given assignments on their own. If they struggled during face-to-face sessions, the teachers should

have thought ahead and known that they would struggle online without the assistance of a teacher.

Findings regarding the participants' experiences related to retention supports what is dominant in the literature about how retention does more harm than good to students. However, here are four participants who, regardless of what they encountered have hope that things will be better for them. James is presently on track, and he is excelling in every area academically. He has this inward drive to excel. He is determined to prove that his third-grade teacher was wrong to push for retention when she knew that he only fell behind because he suffered a great loss. Sean is getting the needed help that will help him to succeed and he is much more confident and happier about where he is academically. Harry still struggles with fear of students finding out that he was once retained. He has done much better talking with his teachers; however, he is still a loner and prefers to stay by himself. He doesn't get involved in conversations unless they pertain to him. Henry still struggles academically and emotionally. He is now in the ESE program that offers him extra help to be successful. He still hates school and only enjoys playing sports. He hopes that one day that he will be the best mechanic. The lived experiences of the four participants show that retention has affected them not only academically but also emotionally. Their resilience and persistence show that there is hope after the setback which they have encountered.

## **Implications**

It is important to create dialogue among individuals who are responsible for creating policies that have lasting impacts on the lives of students. These implications target various stakeholders connected to the education system: teachers, administrators, and policy makers.

## **Implications for Teachers**

It is important that elementary teachers get a deeper understanding of the students that they teach. Learning about their backgrounds, their home life, and their culture is extremely important. There is a famous saying that I think all educators should embrace: “If you don’t know me, you can’t teach me.” Knowing each student is vital to be effective. All teachers should seek to have a clearer understanding of and appreciation for diversity. Diversity is here to stay, so it is important that all educators are equipped with the necessary training that will serve all students.

This study can serve as a mirror for all teachers, especially for those teaching third grade. Teachers must realize the impact that retention has on the lives of students. If a student is retained, then teachers must ensure that the student has a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP). All students are different and learn at different rates. The one-size- fits- all system is convenient for adults but detrimental for students, especially those who have been retained. Teachers should also provide the tools that students who are retained need to be successful. Tools include but are not limited to one-to- one teaching, smaller classroom settings and more intensive and effective instruction.

### **Implications for Teacher Educators**

Every problem has a beginning. It is important that we seek to find out the root of the problem and address it from that angle. Teacher preparation is extremely important. For teacher candidates to be successful in the classroom, they must be prepared to do so. As stated before, diversity is here to stay. All programs in teacher education must be equipped to train teachers for a diverse world. Teachers should be equipped with the necessary tool to reach all students academically. Teacher candidates must be taught that students are not our problems to fix. Students come with their unique abilities, and it is important that teacher candidates be taught to find out the needs of each child and help him from where he is.

I think that it is extremely important that all teacher candidates be exposed to students who are in title 1 schools. It is important for teacher candidates to see all aspect of the education system and be prepared to work with students who do not come from a rich and polished environment. Teacher candidates must be challenged to see their own biases especially when it comes to working with students who are from different ethnic group, culture, and environment. It is important to bring to the table the importance of equity and embracing the fact that all students matter, and all students can learn. If we work on preparing teacher candidates for the world that awaits them as it pertains to the school system, then more than likely, our classrooms will be much better, and all students are treated as individuals and not as one- size- fits- all mentality.

### **Implications for Administrators**

This study has implications for administrators in elementary schools. Findings from this study can help administrators to put in place necessary tools that will help students who are retained to be successful. First and foremost, there should be counseling for students who have been retained. Retained students often feel like they are failures, and that all hope of succeeding academically is gone. Giving them the opportunity to speak with a counselor can help them build back their self-confidence. Administrators can also implement programs that will help retained students to be successful. Programs include but are not limited to morning or after school programs targeted to helping students who have been retained with extra support. New programs at times need funding. Administrators can seek out avenues to bring in money that will fund these programs. Administrators must also embrace a zero-tolerance policy that protects students who have been retained from bullying.

Administrators must ensure that students who are retained are not placed with the teachers they had the year before. They must also place students with highly effective reading

teachers who have been reading endorsed. They should also seek to place students into a smaller classroom setting. Smaller classrooms allow for more one-on-one attention, which these students need to be successful. Findings from this study can serve as guidance for administrators when it comes to hiring teachers. Administrators must make sure that their new hires have been trained to work in a diverse environment. New hires must have experience with working with minorities, especially Hispanic and African American boys. These implications are important so that changes can be made that will prevent any other students from experiencing what these four participants encountered.

### **Implications for Policy/Policy Makers**

Finally, this study presents implications for individuals who make policies that have an impact of the lives of students in the elementary school system. It is important that individuals who are making policies be trained in the education system and have firsthand knowledge of working with students. A dialogue among teachers, administrators, and students should occur before decisions are made that relates to retention. Findings from this study shows that all four participants thought that retention was wrong and should never have been implemented. When it comes to making decisions that will affect the lives of students, students should be brought to the table and be allowed to have their voice heard.

Policy makers should also fund programs that will help students who have been retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law. Policy makers should also put in place a program so that all teachers are trained to work within a diverse school environment. They should also ensure that all schools are equipped with the necessary tools for the success of all students regardless of the color of their skins, culture, religion, and sexuality. Policy makers should put forth a law that will hold schools accountable for not implementing the model set by the state to provide the extra help that is needed for retained students to be successful. The drawings that

were done by these students during this study should send a strong message to educators, administrators, and policy makers about their feelings towards retention. Making necessary changes to serve and help students who have been retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law will not only strengthen the elementary school system but also bring about much needed change as it relates to students and retention.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Throughout this research, I kept a reflexivity journal. After each interview, I had the opportunity to reflect on the experiences shared by the participants. I was so happy that I had this journal because there were days when the sessions were hard because of what was shared. All the emotions that I held inside during the days I was able to release through my journaling. There was time when I shed tears as I journaled. However, I noticed that after I finished journaling for the day, I felt a sense of relief. When I recorded what was shared, it gave me the opportunity to rephrase some questions or strengthened questions.

I was surprised to discover how willing the participants were willing to share. They gave detailed information and many times I did not have to probe but sat back and allowed them to talk. When I asked one of the participants how is it that he remembered everything and can give detailed responses. His response was, "Miss McMorris, how can I forget about being retained"? As journaled and reflected daily it drew me so much closer to my belief as an educator and what my next step in the education system will be. Finally, from journaling daily, I was able to ask other doctoral candidates their advice (my writing group). Journaling helped me reflect on my own biases and reminded me daily the importance of telling the participants stories and not my opinions.

### **Limitations of Current Study**

The data that were collected for this unique study about the lived retention experiences of two Hispanics and two African American boys have limitations. All four participants have been attending the same school for several years. I have been an educator at the school since its opening (2011), so I knew all the teachers that these participants were talking about. This fact led to some hesitation among the participants to share in detail everything that happened in the classroom. At one point during an interview session with one of the participants, he stopped halfway during his reflection and asked me to promise that what he was about to share would never be repeated to the teacher that he was talking about.

An additional limitation that could be considered in this study is the accuracy of the four participants' reflection. They were interviewed two years after they left the third grade, so their accounts may have included some additions or omissions of their experiences. After each session, I had the opportunity to reflect in my journal. I was careful to note in detailed some of the experiences that these participants shared. Some were heart wrenching and caused me to shed a tear or two. Finally, another limitation was the fact that all these participants were boys who attended the same school; therefore, there was no diversity of biological sex and context.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The purpose of this research was to understand how third grade retention policies in Florida's mandatory retention law have influenced students' lives and lived experiences. I strongly believe that there are several options for directions for future research. One option is to conduct a study of stakeholders in the elementary school system regarding their lived experiences of working with students who have been retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law. Gaining insight into these stakeholders' perspectives would bring about a

meaningful conversation that could have an impact on the elementary education system as it pertains to retention.

Another recommendation when conducting future research is to increase the number of participants and include students of different genders, and ethnic groups. These students would also be chosen from different elementary schools. Different data collection methods should also be used. Some approaches to data collection should include but not be limited to focus groups and surveys. In focus groups, participants are able to share their experiences, and this could encourage others to join in the discussion and share their experiences as well. Surveys could provide opportunities for authentic sharing without being influenced by anyone else.

Future research could also be “The Long-term emotional effects of retention.” Findings from this study showed the emotional trauma that the participants experienced. All four participants used the same words to describe their feelings. Research on the above topic will give an insight into the long-term emotional effects of retention. I think this research could be done using arts-based research. Arts-based methodology is very effective and gives readers an empathetic view of the lives of others and their lived experiences.

Finally, since these policies affect the lives of students, the students should be given a voice as it relates to retention in the third grade. Students should be allowed to take an exit survey to share their experiences after being retained for a year. Information gathered from these surveys should be a part of a study to understand trends from their perspectives. Policies about retention should not be one size fits all. This research was never about whether retention is positive or negative. It was my intention as a researcher to understand the lived experience of students who were retained because of Florida’s mandatory retention law. Reflecting on this



study and the recommendations of future studies should allow stakeholders to actively participate in conversations that have the students' best interest at heart.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I reminded my readers of the purpose of this study and the questions that steered this study. I highlighted ways in which I connected the tenets of critical race theory to the findings of this study. I discussed how the findings of this study are related to the present literature. I offered implications and directions of future research as it pertains to the lived experience of students who are retained because of Florida's mandatory retention law. Finally, throughout this chapter, I was diligent in maintaining the importance of the students' narratives and views about retention.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview One Life History**

### **Introduction:**

“Hello. I am Miss McMorris. I am a teacher, and I am also a graduate student at a university in Tampa. I am presently doing research about the experience of students who were retained. I am so happy to talk with you to learn I will be taping our conversation as this will give me the opportunity to listen to you while you share your experience. I want you to share whatever you are comfortable sharing. If you need a break before I am finish, please let me know.”

### **1.) “I would like to learn more about you so let’s start by you telling me about yourself.”**

- Age
- Likes/dislikes
- Family - Who do you live with at home?
- Friends - Do you have friends that don’t look like you? Are you allowed to visit their homes? Are they allowed to visit your home?
- Hobbies - Do you ever go on vacation? If yes, share a vacation that you enjoyed and why.

### **2.) “I am interested to learn more about your school life and things that you like to do in school.”**

- Think about all the things that you do in school, what do you do well?
- What do you find challenging in school?
- Whenever you don’t understand your schoolwork, who helps you to understand it?

- Have you ever had a black or Hispanic teacher? If yes, how many and in what grade?
- Describe how your Black/Hispanic teacher treated you in comparison to your White teachers.

**3.) Tell me how you learned that you would be retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade?**

**4.) Describe your life in the third grade the first time that you were in the grade.**

**5.) Did anyone asked you about being retained or what you thought?**

- Mom/Dad
- Teacher- Were you ever threatened by your teacher about retention?

**6.) What are some words that you can use to describe your reactions when you were first told that you would be retained?**

**7.) How did you react at first when you were told that you would be retained in the third grade? Who did you share your feelings with?**

**8.) Did you have to attend summer school that year you were told that you would be retained? If yes, how did you feel about going to summer school? How many other students who looked like you were attending summer school that year because they were going to be retained?**

## **Appendix B: Semi -Structured Interview Two the Detail of Experience**

Today during this session, we will be creating an art piece. I would like you to create a picture showing how you feel about retention and his experience having been retained. (After student create art, he will be asked about it.

- 1.) Tell me about your art piece.**
- 2.) Why did you decide to create this particular art piece?**
- 3.) How did creating the art make you feel?**
- 4.) Would you like to share anything more about your picture that we haven't already spoken about?**

## **Appendix C: Semi -Structured Interview Three**

### **Reflection on Meaning**

**1.) How do you think other people felt about you being retained?**

- Parents
- Teachers
- Friends
- Siblings

**2.) If you had the opportunity to share with your teacher or parents about retention, what would you say?**

**3.) Now that some time has passed since your retention, tell me if you think retention was helpful or not and in what way?**

**4.) Think about the year that you were retained, how were you treated by your peers, your teachers and your parent (s)?**

**5.) Think about the year that you were retained, what was the greatest challenge?**

- I would like you to go back to the picture you drew, look at it carefully, is there any section that shows any challenge that you encountered?
- If yes, tell me about it. If no without pictures share your experience.

**6.) How would you finish this sentence? The experience I had during the year that I was retained .....**

**7.) How are you doing now? Tell me what happened from third grade until present.**



## **Appendix D: An Extract from my Journal**

### **An Extract from my Journal**

Today I met with the third participant. He is tall and looks very mature. The maturity in his voice was obvious. He was ready to respond to questions posed. His responses were very detailed, and one could tell that he was eager to share. His in-depth information showed that he had processed what he went through as a student who was retained in the third grade. So far, he seemed to be more traumatized than the others. His anger was evident, and he blamed his mom and dad for adding unnecessary pressure on him. He shared that they tied any fun activities that he wanted to do to his academic.

He shared that they don't believe how hard he works and the added pressure that he feels at school contributes to his daily failure. He thinks that the added pressure causes him to be stressed all the time and he doesn't believe that he will ever be successful at school. "Too much pressure", he shouted. He also shared that he wants to live with his father, but his mom will never allow that to happen. From information shared, it seems like he and his mom are always fighting.

He seemed angry whenever he spoke about school and his mom. Looking into his eyes one could see the hurt and pain he has been carrying. His in-depth information was all captured on tape. I felt drawn to this participant, maybe because of the obvious hurt that could be seen. He responded freely to the questions and shared so much information. Our conversation flowed smoothly. I allowed him to share all that he wanted to share. I gave him space to deal with all the emotions he was experiencing at that time. He was never prompted to share what he didn't want to share. Overall, I think the interview went well and I am happy with the information that I was able to gather.

## Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter



### APPROVAL

September 27, 2021

Sophia McMorris  
1904 Stanfield Dr  
Brandon, FL 33511

Dear Ms. Sophia McMorris:

On 9/23/2021, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY003074
Review Type:	Expedited (7) & (6)
Title:	How do Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience about retention?
Funding:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approved Protocol and Consent(s)/Assent(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New IRB.docx;</li><li>• Social Behavioral Assent.pdf;</li><li>• Social Behavioral Parental Permission.pdf;</li></ul> <p>Approved study documents can be found under the 'Documents' tab in the main study workspace. Use the stamped consent found under the 'Last Finalized' column under the 'Documents' tab.</p>

Within 30 days of the anniversary date of study approval, confirm your research is ongoing by clicking Confirm Ongoing Research in BullsIRB, or if your research is complete, submit a study closure request in BullsIRB by clicking Create Modification/CR.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

This research involving children as participants was approved under 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving greater than minimal risk to children is presented. Permission of one parent is sufficient. Assent will be obtained as outlined in the IRB application.

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**Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance**

FWA No. 00001669

University of South Florida / 3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 165 / Tampa, FL 33612 / 813-974-5638

Page 1 of 2



Sincerely,

Tatyana Harris  
IRB Research Compliance Administrator

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**Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance**

FWA No. 00001669

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## Appendix F: Informed Consent/Child Assent Form



### Assent of Children to Participate in Research

Study # 003077

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**Title of study:** How do Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience about retention?

**Why am I being asked to take part in this research?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study about the experiences of Black and Hispanic males retained through Florida's mandatory third grade retention law. You are being asked to take part in this research study because you have been retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 4 people at this site.

**Who is doing this study?**

The person in charge of this study is Sophia McMorris. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Deidre Cobb-Roberts and Dr. Jennifer Jacobs. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

By doing this study, we hope to learn how third grade retention policies in Florida's mandatory retention law have influenced students' lives and lived experiences.

**Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?**

The study will be taken place at Winthrop Charter School. You will be asked to participate in 3 visits which will take about 30 minutes. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 90 minutes over the next three weeks.

**What will you be asked to do?**

- You will be asked some questions about your experience as a retained student.
- You will be asked some questions and you will be allowed to share whatever you are comfortable sharing. If there are any questions that you do not wish to respond to, you will be able to state that you do not wish to answer that question.
- The researcher will use a series of three separate in-depth interviews per participants.

**What things might happen if you participate?**

To the best of our knowledge, your participation in this study will not harm you.

**Is there benefit to me for participating?**

We cannot promise that you will receive benefit from taking part in this research study. However, some people have experienced pride whenever they share their lived experience that could one day bring about change to an existing problem.

**What other choices do I have if I do not participate?**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

**Do I have to take part in this study?**

You should talk with your parents or guardian and others about taking part in this research study. If you do not want to take part in the study, that is your decision. You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer.

**Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?**

You will not receive any compensation for taking part in this study.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your information will be added to the information from other people taking part in the study so no one will know who you are.

**Can I change my mind and quit?**

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to change your mind later. No one will think badly of you if you decide to stop participating. Also, the people who are running this study may need for you to stop. If this happens, they will tell you when to stop and why.

**What if I have questions?**

You can ask questions about this study at any time. You can talk with your parents, guardian or other adults about this study. You can talk with the person who is asking you to volunteer by calling Sophia McMorris at 813-708-3904. If you think of other questions later, you can ask them. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you can also call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact the IRB by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

**Assent to Participate**

I understand what the person conducting this study is asking me to do. I have thought about this and agree to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G: Parental Permission for a Child to Participate in Research



### Parental Permission for a Child to Participate in Research

Information for parents to consider before allowing your child to take part in this research study.

**Title:** How do Black and Hispanic males who are retained make meaning of their lived experience about retention?

**Study # 003074**

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**Overview:** We are asking you to allow your child to take part in a research study. The following information is being presented to help you and your child decide whether or not your child should participate in a research study. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.

When we use the term “you” in this document, we are referring to your child.

Study Staff: This study is being led by *Sophia McMorris* who is a *PhD student* at The University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at your child’s school. This study aims to explore the experiences of children retained through Florida’s mandatory third grade retention law. The purpose is to understand how third grade retention policies in Florida’s mandatory retention law have influenced students’ lives and lived experiences. I will attempt to tell their stories through multiple case study using narrative inquiry to answer the research questions. Your child will participate in 3 (30 minutes) interviews.

Participants (Ages 11-12): You are being asked to take part because you were retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because of Florida’s mandatory retention law. I want to learn about your experiences as a student who has been retained because of this law.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life.]

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

---

### Why are you being asked to take part?

Social-Behavioral Parental Permission

Version #

08/1/2021

Version Date:



This study aims to explore the experiences of Black and Hispanic males retained through Florida's mandatory third grade retention law. As a researcher, I seek to understand how third grade retention policies in Florida's mandatory retention law have influenced their lives and lived experiences. I believe that the findings from this research will add to a body of literature that needs development. Exploring the experiences of Black and Hispanic males who have been retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because of the state mandated law is critical. Our policy makers and those who make decisions for students need to know the impact these policy or decisions have on students now and in the future. By exploring these experiences, it is my hope that we may begin to understand and support the need of all children. These implications will have an impact on policy now and in the future.

### **Study Procedures:**

During this study, I will be meeting with your child once weekly for a total of 3 weeks. I will conduct an interview with your child that should last no more than 30 minutes. Your child will be talking with me only in a private room on his school campus. This room is large, and your child will be seated 3 feet away from me. Your child and I will be wearing mask at all times during the 30 minutes interview. The room is soundproof so no one can hear our conversation. I will be recording our conversation to capture all the information that will be shared. Recordings and written materials will all be secured. Recordings will be uploaded on a secured password control transcription site. After the transcript is downloaded, the information will be removed from the site. The questions that will be asked all pertain to experience as a student who was retained because of Florida mandatory retention law. Your child's identity will never be disclosed at any time during and after the completion of the study. All information will be secured on a computer that will be used only by me and is controlled by a unique password. After 5 years all information will be destroyed. All information on paper will be shredded. Information stored on computer will be deleted.

### **Total Number of Participants**

About 4 individuals will take part in this study at their school campus.

### **Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty if you stop taking part in this study.

### **Benefits**

You will receive no benefit(s) by participating in this research study.

### **Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. Since this interview will be conducted face to face, there is a risk of transmission of the novel coronavirus from these procedures. All precautions will be taken, however, I cannot guarantee that the participant will not be exposed to the virus.

### **Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

### **Costs**

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will do our best to keep your records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your study records. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, and all other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, and staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

Your information or samples collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will NOT be used or distributed for future research studies.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

### **You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Sophia McMorris at 813-708-3904. If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).



### Consent for My Child to Participate in this Research Study

I freely give my permission to let my child take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to let my child take part in research. I have received a signed copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of **Parent** of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of **Parent** of Child Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of the **Child** Taking Part in Study

### Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

## **Appendix H: A Letter to Recruit Participants for the Study**

### **A Letter to Recruit Participants for the Research Study**

Dear Parents,

I am a doctoral student at the University of South Florida. I am currently working towards the completion of my Doctoral Degree in Curriculum and Instruction – Elementary Education. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students who have been retained because of Florida mandatory retention law.

The ideal participant for this study is a male student (Black or Hispanic) who has been retained in the third grade because of the Florida's mandatory retention law. I would be grateful if you will be willing to allow your child to take part in my study. If you are interested, please contact me at the address below. You will be given an opportunity to find out more about the study before making a final decision to have your child participate. Thank you for your assistance.

If you have any question, please let me know.

[Sophia11@mail.usf.edu](mailto:Sophia11@mail.usf.edu)

Sincerely,

Sophia McMorris

## **Appendix I : Letter to Principal Requesting Meeting**

*An email to my principal requesting a meeting to discuss my research and seek his permission/approval to interview 4 students who were retained because of Florida mandatory retention law*

Dear Principal,

I am a doctoral student at the University of South Florida. I am currently working towards the completion of my Doctoral Degree in Curriculum and Instruction – Elementary Education. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students (4 male – Black and Hispanics) who have been retained because of Florida mandatory retention law.

I am hereby requesting a meeting to discuss this research in depth. During this meeting the following will be discussed.

1. The purpose of this study
2. The selection process of participants
3. The steps that will be taken to keep all information gathered confident
4. The permission letter that will be sent to parents

I am available to meet anytime. Thanking you in advance for your time and assistance.

Sophia McMorris

**Appendix J : Letter from the Principal Granting Permission to do the Research at the  
School**

8/25/21

To whom it may concern,

Please accept this letter on behalf of Ms. Sophia McMorris, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade teacher, at [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. I have reviewed her research and find it appropriate for our student  
population. Ms. McMorris is permitted to conduct her research activities on-site and we  
possess the necessary resources for her to complete this objective. As principal, I can serve as  
contact. As a learning community, we do have provisions in place to address any unanticipated  
outcomes and/or adverse events associated with the on-campus activity.

  
[REDACTED]  
Principal

[REDACTED]