

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:       IMAGERY MATTERS: EXPLORING THE  
                                  REPRESENTATION(S) OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
                                  MALE STUDENTS IN SEASON FOUR OF *THE*  
                                  *WIRE*.

Johnette Ruffner-Ceaser, Doctor of Education, 2012

Directed By:             Hanne B. Mawhinney, Ph.D., Associate Professor,  
                                  Department of Teaching, Learning, Policy and  
                                  Leadership

The educational challenges facing young African American male students are complex and multifaceted. The media play a significant role in the perpetuation of these challenges, due to the historically negative and stereotypical portrayals of Black males. Despite the plethora of research and discourse about the educational attainment of African American male students, few studies explore the academic and masculine portrayals of this population of students in the media. Using a textual analysis guided by a theoretical framework of cultural representation and televisual realism, this qualitative inquiry seeks to examine and interpret the cultural message(s) *The Wire* conveyed about African American male students in the era of *No Child Left Behind*. This study explores the intersection between academic and masculine portrayals of four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire* using dimensions of cool pose

and traditional stereotypical tropes and counter-tropes that visual media have historically used to portray African American males in visual media.

The findings from this study revealed that the four boys studied in season 4 of *The Wire* were multi-dimensional characters. As such, they were characterized using traditional stereotypical tropes, but their characterizations shifted into more encouraging representations. The shift in these characterizations created emergent themes that spoke to the cultural messages conveyed about African American male students through season 4 of *The Wire*.

The findings from this study have implications for policy, school leadership, and future research. First, Congress should commission a committee of representatives from civil rights groups, foundations, and media reform activists to review and assess the historical and contemporary portrayals of African American males on television. Based on its findings, the committee should offer media reform recommendations to Congress.

Second, because school systems currently struggle with identifying appropriate methods to address the needs of African American male students, school systems and parent groups should collaborate with organizations and foundations that work to establish creative outlets for young men of color to tell their own stories in alternative media. Third, given few studies have explored the representation of African American male students in visual media, the field needs additional research in this area.

IMAGERY MATTERS: EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION(S) OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS IN SEASON FOUR OF *THE WIRE*

By

Johnette Yvonne Ruffner-Ceaser

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
2012

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Hanne B. Mawhinney, Chair  
Associate Professor Linda Aldoory  
Professor Barbara Finkelstein  
Professor Courtland Lee, Dean's Representative  
Professor of Practice Carol Parham

© Copyright by  
Johnette Yvonne Ruffner-Ceaser  
2012

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter. Thank you for being mommy's inspiration.

## Acknowledgements

I give all glory and honor to God for this blessing. I decided to take this journey during a Sunday morning worship service. I developed a desire to pursue this path, and God said, “Just take one step, and I’ll do the rest.” He has done just that.

I am grateful for my husband who has supported me, sacrificed for me, and has encouraged me to pursue my dreams.

I am thankful for my mother and father, Savannah and John Ruffner, who are my cheerleaders; always ready to extend a listening ear and to offer up a word of encouragement, and I thank God for my grandmother. I am grateful for her strength and her faith in me.

I am honored to have friends that have spoken greatness into my life. They believed in me when I did not believe in myself.

Finally, I thank Dr. Mawhinney for her demonstrations of care and concern about her students. The support that she has extended to me over the years is second to none.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Tables .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Context for Study .....	1
Research Problem .....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Research Question .....	6
Theoretical Framework .....	6
Cultural Studies .....	6
Cool Pose .....	6
Realism .....	8
Overview of Dissertation .....	8
Significance .....	8
Limitations .....	9
Definition of Terms .....	9
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	11
Realism .....	12
Cultural Studies and Representation .....	17
Hegemony .....	21
Historical Portrayals of African American Males on Television .....	22
Minstrels .....	23
Uplifting the Race .....	24
1950s .....	25
1960s .....	26
1970s .....	27
1980s .....	30
1990s-2000s .....	31
<i>The Wire</i> .....	32
Hegemonic Masculinity in Media Representations of Black Males .....	40
Cool Pose .....	43
Framing the Study .....	54
Chapter 3: Design and Methodology .....	57
Research Question .....	57
Research Design .....	58
Rationale for Qualitative Methodology .....	58
Rationale for Textual Analysis .....	59

Defining the Study .....	60
Levels of Units and Analysis .....	62
Data Collection Tools .....	62
Data Analysis .....	65
Standards of Quality and Validity.....	67
 Chapter 4: Season Four of <i>The Wire</i> .....	 72
Background .....	72
Overview .....	72
Episode 1: Boys of Summer .....	73
Episode 2: Soft Eyes .....	76
Episode 3: Home Room .....	77
Episode 4: Refugees.....	79
Episode 5: Alliances .....	81
Episode 6: Margin of Error .....	83
Episode 7: Unto Others .....	84
Episode 8: Corner Boys .....	87
Episode 9: Know Your Place .....	92
Episode 10: Misgiving .....	101
Episode 11: A New Day .....	105
Episode 12: That's Got His Own .....	109
Episode 13: Final Grades .....	115
Summary .....	120
 Chapter 5: The Boys and Cool Pose .....	 122
The Portraits.....	124
Duquan "Dukie" Weems.....	124
Micahel Lee .....	132
Namond Brice .....	142
Randy Wagstaff .....	153
Summary .....	160
 Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications .....	 161
Research Problem, Purpose, and Question .....	161
Conceptual Framework.....	162
Research Methods.....	163
Setting of the Study.....	163
Summary of Findings.....	163
Conclusions.....	167
Discussion of Findings in Light of Existing Research.....	171
Recommendations for Future Research .....	174
Recommendations for Policy and Practice .....	177
 Appendix A.....	 180
 Bibliography .....	 183



## List of Tables

Table 1	Cool Pose and Historical Tropes	54
Table 2	Relationship of Historical Tropes to Emergent Tropes	160

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Context of Study**

Television is a cultural agent that shapes the ideology of its audience. As such, explorations of television portrayals and messages are necessary to anticipate their implications on various components of society. One such component that existing research has not explored in depth is the representation of African American<sup>1</sup> male students on television. Examining representations of these students in the media is significant for two reasons:

- a. Television may be imposing or influencing a racial interpretation about African American male students on its audiences. This influence is problematic because audience interpretations can shape perceptions, learning, reasoning, and cultural beliefs (Pink, 2001).
- b. A correlation may exist between these representations and the academic success of this and other populations of struggling students.

The educational standing of young Black males over the last two decades has increasingly become worse than the standing of any other minority group or gender (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2008, p. 3). For example, less than 50% of Black males graduated from high school in the 2005-2006 and the 2007-2008 school years (Schott Foundation, 2008, 2010; Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2006). More Black males are serving prison sentences than are earning undergraduate degrees (Children's Defense Fund, 2008; Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2006); and "in relation to their peers, Black male students experience higher levels of placement in

---

<sup>1</sup> African American and Black will be used interchangeably

special education, school suspensions and expulsions, school dropout, and lower levels of academic achievement as measured by standardized tests” (Brown & Kraehe, 2011, p. 23; Schott Foundation, 2008).

Brown and Kraehe (2011) indicated that “across the twentieth century, education discourses have targeted Black males as a special population in need of rescue and protection” (p. 74). This perceived need did not originate solely from educational research and discourses, but has developed in response to negative historical and contemporary representations of African American males in the media. Too often, media and educational discourses position Black male students as learning disabled, disorderly, problematic, and socially deviant. These negative messages could be contributing to the high dropout rates, low graduation rates, disproportionate suspensions and expulsions, and zero tolerance policies that induce the public to equate the African American male student with academic failure (Brown & Kraehe, 2011; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Schott Foundation, 2008; Ward, 2004). This type of representation can hinder African American male students, because it concretizes a distorted image, in their minds and in that of the masses, about what it means to be a Black male student in the U.S. and abroad (Brown & Kraehe, 2011; Martin, 2008). These constructions of Black males and masculinity, “inform social responses to him and opportunities made available to him in society and in school” (Brown & Kraehe, 2011, p. 74).

One construction of Black masculinity is *cool* or *cool pose*. *Cool* is one dominant, contemporary media representation that has shaped the societal image of Black males for decades. Television’s representation of *cool pose*, as an image of African American males, became a part of pop culture in the 1970s, through dramatic films like

*Shaft* and comedic television shows like *Good Times*. These images of cool or cool pose (Majors & Billson, 1992), progressed and morphed into more aggressive, derogatory demonstrations of coolness in the 1990s, through stereotypical movies like *Boyz in the Hood* and programs like *South Central* (Henry, 2002). These later portrayals of cool, with which many young African American males identify today, have dominated the African American male image in the media and beyond.

The portrayal of cool pose in television and movies generally has helped to make the concept of cool incompatible with the popular perception of a “good student.” This type of depiction has created a very limited view of African American males, and has left little room for other identity points, like academics (Osborne, 1999, p. 559).

Unfortunately, the media rarely promotes a marriage between these two identity points (cool and academics). Television and movies either portray the Black male as cool, with little regard for school, or they create a character who identifies with school, but lacks cool (Noguera, 2003).

These types of portrayals conjure up questions about the cultural representations of African American male students on television. Specifically, what messages do the media convey about young African American male students’ engagement with education and masculinity? What does it mean to be an intelligent African American male? Can African American male students simultaneously be cool and identify strongly with academics? If so, how do African American male students come to understand this dichotomy? How does television influence the way in which African American male students come to perceive schooling? How do teachers, advocates, and parents perceive media messages about African American male students? These perceptions are key, as

they can affect African American male students' level engagement with academics (Noguera, 2003). This study will not answer all of these questions, but it allows for an in-depth investigation into constructs of and about this population of students by examining their portrayal in *The Wire*, an arguably realistic television portrayal of African American male students.

As previously stated, African American male students face numerous and multifaceted challenges. For the last two decades, social scientists increasingly have explored the key factors that will address the academic challenges facing this group of students. Pockets of literature and significant academic discourse indicate that the media may be one of the key cultural factors that affect the educational success of African American male students (Entman, 2006; Majors, 2001; Osborne, 1999; Ward, 2004). However, the dominate research has focused on education reform, criminal justice reform, economic development, and health (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute, 2006; Schott Foundation, 2009; The Ford Foundation, 2008; Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2005). Therefore, the goal of this study is to help broaden the scope of education research on African American male students by: (a) exploring the literature on representations of African American male students on television using a media perspective, and (b) exploring, suggesting, and viewing masculinity as a component of education (Henry, 2002).

### **Research Problem**

As mentioned above, the current discourse and literature on young African American male students primarily focuses on four main areas: education reform, criminal justice reform, economic development, and health (Joint Center for Political and

Economic Studies Health Policy Institute, 2006; Schott Foundation, 2009; The Ford Foundation, 2008; Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2005). However, the challenge of educating young Black males is not solely the result of these issues. The image of young African American male students presented to the world through television may also have a significant impact on the educational experiences of African American male students. Entman (2006) found that these images could affect how teachers and staff perceived and treated these students in the classroom and in other societal institutions; which, consequently, could influence the students' relationships with these institutions.

The dominant discourse and literature on African American male students is engaging and certainly warrants attention, but the scope must broaden to include media representations. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature and broaden the scholarship. The implications for addressing these representations of young African American male students are significant, because this type of exploration could help lead to new approaches to addressing the educational challenges of African American male students.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore and interpret the cultural messages about masculinity and academics conveyed through the depiction of four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*. This study does not explore only these portrayals and representations. Rather, given the authentic nature of *The Wire*, it offers a rich opportunity for more exploration into dominant societal constructs about this population of students. Through the close examination of one exemplary television

show's portrayal of African American male students, this study presents new constructs for examining the media's characterizations of these students.

### **Research Question**

One overarching research question guides this study:

- What cultural messages about masculinity and academics are conveyed through four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*?

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Cultural studies.** Cultural Studies, as described by Stuart Hall (n.d.), is “an approach to studying culture that lies at the intersection between the social sciences, most notably sociology, and the humanities, especially literature. As a non-disciplinary study, cultural studies draw from diverse fields and academic traditions” (p. 1), cultural studies is intellectually rooted in the work of Marx, Weber, Mead, Howard Becker, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Roland Barthes, Georg Lukács, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and various feminists.

Though the roots and areas of study are diverse, we can say that Cultural Studies offers a critical perspective that focuses on the political implications of mass culture. Hall (n.d.) noted four ideas central to cultural studies: hegemony, signs and semiotics, representation and discourse, and meaning and struggle.

**Cool Pose.** Cool pose is an established or prescribed way to achieve manhood that helps African American males deal with and survive in an oppressive environment often experienced, by this population, in every aspect of social life, including U.S. schools (Connor, 2003; Osborne, 1999). African American males display this *cool pose* through

certain behaviors, such as speech and vernacular (e.g., current slang, Ebonics); physical posturing, hand gestures, facial expressions, style of dress, sexual promiscuity, and participation in hip-hop culture (Cross, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Patterson, 2006; Wester, Vogel, Wei & McLain, 2006). More aggressive approaches to cool pose can result in what appears to be hostile behavior, which generates the appearance of toughness or rebellion. This appearance may be a façade; there may not truly be a connection with such attitudes or behavior. It may simply be an attempt to regain or maintain feelings of self-worth and respect (Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, 2009).

Cool pose is typically incompatible with being a good student and relates more closely to being disengaged with school (Osborne, 1999). Some sociologists believe “cool-pose culture” is too gratifying for young Black men to give up for the sake of focusing on academic pursuits (Chaddha & Wilson, 2011). Participation in this community can be fulfilling and can bring a great deal of respect in some circles (Patterson, 2006). Young Black men may feel that participating in this culture is the only way they can feel respected and viewed as a valuable human being.

Researchers have linked culture to the academic success for many Black students (Tyler, Boykin & Walton, 2006). Given that cool posing is a cultural practice, its characteristics have the potential to influence leadership and academic ability (Cross, 2004, 2008). Unfortunately, the media has narrowly framed cool pose and used it to perpetuate stereotypical images of young Black males; which results in a societal lack of understanding and awareness of its use and benefits.



**Realism.** Buehler (2010) described realism as a way of assessing how a film relates to the world. He explained that realism is “a way of comparing different texts... a mode of representation that, at the formal level, [that] aims at verisimilitude” (Buehler, 2010, p. 9).

## **Overview of Dissertation**

Chapter 2 outlines the literature that illustrates the significance of the research question and provides a basis for the development of the heuristic framework that will guide my analysis. I divide the literature review into two parts. Part I covers four bodies of research literature comprised of realism, representation, hegemony, and cool pose. Part II provides a historical overview of television’s portrayal of African American males. Next, I provide a background on *The Wire* and discuss its writers, purpose, and audience. Finally, I explore the literature on hegemonic masculinity, which leads to a discussion about cool pose and the historical tropes that the media has used to represent African American males.

Chapter 3 details the design and methodology of the study. Chapter 4 focuses on *The Wire* in relation to cool pose, school, and the four African American characters studied for this dissertation. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study and Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and implications of the study.

## **Significance**

This study will contribute to the scholarship on African American male students in the fields of education and communication by expanding the range of education research on African American male students beyond education reform, criminal justice reform, economic development, and health. This work will accomplish this goal by

incorporating masculinity as a component of education through the examination of television portrayals of four African American male student characters in *The Wire*. This inquiry also will expand communication research to include the portrayals of African American male students and promote the intersection between academics and masculinity in education and communication.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, the aim of this study is to interpret the cultural message(s) conveyed about masculinity and academics through four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*. I did not design this study to find one correct interpretation. Second, this study does not focus on the impact of these cultural messages. Third, I have not interviewed the actors, directors, or writers of this show to determine or verify the intended meanings and messages. Fourth, this study focuses on one cable television show that aired from 2002-2008. Fifth, this study only focuses on season 4 of *The Wire*.

### **Definition of Terms**

***African American/Black:*** In this study, African American/Black refers to individuals who are born in the United States and are descendants of slaves of African origin.

***Cool Pose:*** a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control (Mirza, 1999, p. 138).

***Culture:*** Culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings--the giving and taking of meaning--between the members of society or group (Hall, 1997, p. 2).

***Language:*** any sound, word, image or object that functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system capable of carrying and expressing meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 19)

***Realism:*** Realism as a way of assessing how a film relates to the world...”a way of comparing different texts” ... “a mode of representation that, at the formal level, aims at verisimilitude” (Buehler, 2010, p. 9).

***Representation:*** the description or depiction of something (Hall, 1997, p. 16)

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will review the literature that informed my approach to this study in two parts. In Part I, I will examine the literature; on four key topics; including realism, representation, hegemony, and cool pose. First, I examine the literature on realism, to lay a foundation for discussing the authentic nature of *The Wire*. The realism or authenticity of *The Wire* is one of the major components of the series that has led critics to label it a cultural artifact. Second, I examine the literature on representation from a cultural studies perspective. In this section, I discuss cultural studies and the systems of representation. Third, I generally discuss hegemony in relation to the media. This portion of the literature review helps to establish the link between culture, representation, and the media. This understanding helps to inform the basis of the study.

In Part II of this chapter, I will provide a context and backdrop for the study by providing a historical overview of how African American males have been represented on television. I will situate those portrayals within a socio-political context that spans 50 years (1950 to 2000). Second, I discuss the background of the creator and producer of *The Wire*. I also detail the intended purpose and audience of the show, from the perspective of the writers. Third, given that *The Wire* and this study focuses on African American males, I explore hegemonic masculinity, which serves as a springboard for discussing cool pose and the historical tropes the media has used to represent African American males.

## **Realism**

For decades, the concept of realism has been an essential part of film and media studies. Over time, scholars have addressed the concept of realism from many different angles. As a result, its definition has evolved. Early definitions developed from three main theoretical strains of realism in the 1960s and 1970s: “the mediation thesis, Marxism, and structuralism” (Buehler, 2010, p. 5). The mediation thesis suggests that movies/films are a mediator between reality and the audience. Marxism, meanwhile, holds that the truth of social process is something other than it appears, and the only way to determine the truth is “through the science of historical materialism, which reveals the underlying structures and forces determining the dynamics of society” (Buehler, 2010, p. 5). Finally, structuralism suggests that individuals create truth within language. This concept is reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s work on representation, in that “all thoughts about the real world occur through signifying systems” (Buehler, 2010, p. 5). The structuralist perspective generated some scrutiny amongst theorists. The debate revolved around the production and reflection of truth. Specifically, critics questioned how some “texts or representations are determined as true and others false?” (p. 6).

Theorist Colin MacCabe was a vital contributor in the realism debate in the 1960s and 1970s. MacCabe went through several iterations to define realism (Buehler, 2010). He noted that one should define realism by “certain textual organizations” that position the reader, not by “its content or capacity to mirror reality” (Buehler, 2010, p. 7). MacCabe explained that in “classic realist text,” there is a hierarchy amongst discourse and the image track has priority in the hierarchy. This hierarchy may deliver the truth of the text.

MacCabe's second notion was that this textual organization was not the only influencing element of reading text. He noted the importance of considering the ideologies and the class structure of the reader. He also noted the reader is not just the reader, but also an individual who interacts with what he or she reads. The reader then determines which discourse was in disagreement with the secondary discourses of the text. MacCabe's final iteration of realism stated that realism is not a question of outside reality or the connection of the reader to the text, but realism is one of the ways in which the outside reality and the reader relate (Buehler, 2010).

MacCabe received much criticism about his claims, but the most deep-seated objection involved his notion of hierarchy in discourse. According to Buehler (2010), the hierarchy of discourse cannot clarify what sets unrealistic and realistic text apart from one another, or how readers support the notion of realism in select text. Buehler (2010) further stated "any theory of realism must provide an account both for the hierarchisation of discourses within the text and how the spectator comes to privilege, at a particular historical moment, certain discourses over others" (p. 8).

In the mid-1970s, after the various angles of realism had been introduced and debated, the topic of realism in film faded in the academic world, but it later found new life in 2000, with the publication of Hallam and Marshment's work, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, an analysis of modern films (Buehler, 2010). Hallam and Marshment (2000) see realism as a way of assessing how a film relates to the world and consider it "a way of comparing different texts" and "a mode of representation that, at the formal level, aims at verisimilitude" (p. 9). Hallam and Marshment moved away from earlier conceptions of realism, because the authors felt this approach was more appropriate for contemporary

film and allowed for the inclusion of codes. This allowance made a way for films to activate a connection to reality (Buehler, 2010).

Buehler presented four groups of codes, based on Hallam and Marshment's (2000) work. The first group of codes included design, casting, and sound. The second group "[involved] camera techniques that [were] drawn more from documentary, surveillance, and newsgathering rather than classical filmmaking" (Buehler, 2010, p. 10). This approach created the feeling that the cameraperson was a participant in the scene. The third group related to "shot composition and editing techniques" (p. 11). The fourth group involved the "use of technology to 'reali-ize' fantasy sequences" (p. 11). An example characteristic of this fourth grouping would be the special effects used in the movie *Avatar* to create the fantasy world.

Buehler considered films that use these techniques to be "realist by the discourse of criticism, critical reviewing, promotional literature and advertising" (p. 11). In addition to discussing Hallam and Marshment's (2000) approach to realism, Buehler (2010) examined three studies that also tried to find the "realist codes and conventions used in popular films and television" (p. 12). The first study, by R. Barton Palmer (2008), related to the television series *Dragnet*. Palmer attempted to identify the realist components of *Dragnet*, and argued that the show could "represent the things characteristic of real life" because it used conventions like "location shooting and natural lighting" (Buehler, 2010, p. 12). Beyond these conventions, the show fit the realist characterization because it highlighted themes and used special details, which would normally go unaddressed, to help the audience make critical connections with the characters and the issues the characters experienced.

David Pierson authored the second study that Buehler examined. In this study Pierson “looked at the concept of authenticity within Western films independently produced by the cable network TNT” (p. 13). His argument was that labeling a work as authentic essentially means it is “good, true and genuine in nature” (p. 13). He further argued that this label of authenticity gives the work legitimacy while denying other works. Pierson (2003) identified six authenticity markers related to Westerns: source material, a familiar western cast, “historical west”, and a western landscape, a “rugged, individualistic male protagonist who lives by and follows his own moral code,” and “iconography most closely associated with the western film genre” (Buehler, 2010, p. 14).

Pierson’s markers further demonstrated how films and television shows can use codes to make content more realistic. His study is significant because his analysis suggested that the codes are necessary to find “certain thematic discourses within the films” to determine “how westerns engage their viewers by picking up on themes that are represented throughout contemporary American popular culture” (Buehler, 2010, p. 14). Pierson’s argument suggested that indicators of authenticity only are important if they remain within a “cultural product” that touches the audience. This mixture allows the “cultural product” to acquire meaning, which seemingly is a critical step towards authenticity.

*The Wire* works very hard to be a quality work of fiction that reflects reality (Jameson, 2010). The creator, producers, and writers of *The Wire* utilized many of the codes of authenticity identified in the studies shared above. As a result, television critics have lauded the show for its realism. Critics have used words like “truth” and “realism”



to describe the series (Buehler, 2010, p. 2). For example, *The Washington Post*'s Tom Shales wrote, "the sense of realism is uncompromised and rigorous. *The Wire* might be the most authentic epic ever on television" (p. 2). Robert Bianco, from *USA Today*, wrote, "*The Wire* has been one of the best series ever produced for American television, one in which the commitment to honesty and authenticity has never wavered" (p. 1). Melanie McFarland (2010), of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, called the show HBO's "most lifelike" series (p. 2). Brian Holcomb (2008), of *Slant Magazine*, raved, "*The Wire* is as true as television gets" (p. 1). Alessandra Stanley (2008), of *The New York Times*, stated each new season of the show is like a "new *Harry Potter* book for adults", that traffics in realism "instead of magic" (p. 1). Amy Finnerty (2008), from *The Wall Street Journal*, wrote in her piece, "Wired for Authenticity," that *The Wire* is a "faithful representation" of Baltimore, where the characters speak with "regional accents" and the "local lure" (p. 1). Finnerty added, "It's not what happens to the characters, or the societal trends the script explores, that matter so much as the authentic and precise way in which events are represented" (p. 1).

The perspective of these critics helps to support *The Wire*'s power and position as a realistic cultural representation of society. However, it is important to highlight, for this study, that although *The Wire* could serve as an example of televisual realism; realism is an approach that provides more complex portrayals of characters, not necessarily an actual full portrayal of characters, society, etc. Rose (1996) stated that "visual representations ...are never taken as straightforward mirrors of reality. The meanings of an image are understood as constructed through a range of complex and thoroughly social processes and sites of signification" (p. 2).

From a cultural studies perspective, it is important to refer back to Pierson's analysis. As stated above, he suggested that indicators of authenticity are only important if they remain within a "cultural product" that touches the audience. This relationship with the audience allows the "cultural product" to acquire meaning (Buehler, 2010, p. 14). Meaning is based on interpretation (Hall, 1997; McKee 2001).

### **Cultural Studies and Representation**

**Cultural studies.** The field of cultural studies has a rich and diverse background that pulls from various academic traditions and fields of study. Stuart Hall (1980) institutionalized the discipline through his work and leadership at The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham. Hall (n.d.) defined cultural studies as "a critical perspective that focuses on the political implications of mass culture" (p. 2). He also stated that "the theory of culture is defined as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life" (Hall, 1980, p. 60). The underlying notion in cultural studies is that it examines culture and structure in learning how meaning is produced and how certain meanings are preferred over others. The power of cultural studies lies in its ability to extend our knowledge and understanding of how "dominant ideology attempts to privilege some interpretations of texts over others" (p. 99). The discipline is also unique because "culture is where analysis takes place and is also the object of study" (Sodano, 2008, p. 18).

To understand cultural studies fully, we first must understand how Hall, and other proponents of cultural studies, defined culture. In *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms*, Hall (1980) stated:

Culture is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the "mores and folkways of societies-as it tended to become in certain kinds of anthropology.

Culture is threaded through all social practices, and is the sum of their inter-relationship. Culture is those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves-in unexpected identities and correspondences as well as in discontinuities of an unexpected kind-within or underlying all social practices. The analysis of culture is, then, the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships. (p. 60)

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall

(1997) stated, “culture is about shared meanings” (p. 1). He went on to suggest that “culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings-the giving and taking of meaning-between the members of a society or group” (p. 2). According to Sodano (2008), Fiske (1989) defined culture as the “circulation of meanings and pleasures that people give to and gain from their social experience” (p. 18). From a research perspective, Creswell (2007) defined culture as “a vague term” used by researchers to “attribute to a group when looking for patterns of their social world” (p. 71). He went on to suggest that one could understand culture from the language and behaviors of members of a group. All of these definitions are relevant to this study; but to understand how culture, representation, and the media are linked, we must look at the concept of representation and what Hall (1997) referred to as the “circuit of culture” (p. 1).

Hall and du Gay (1997) and other notable scholars created the “circuit of culture” model (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). The major strength of this model is that it focuses on the junction where power and culture intersect. The “circuit of culture” includes a five-part process: regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity. These parts work together to offer a “shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped,

modified, and recreated” (p. 38). The process is a reciprocating, continuous cycle designed to produce meaning.

According to Curtin and Gaither, *regulation* involves “controls and cultural activity, ranging from formal and legal controls, such as regulations, laws, and institutionalized systems, to informal controls and local controls of cultural norms and expectations that form culture in the more commonly used sense of the term” (p. 41). *Production* charts the encoding process, or the “process by which creators of cultural products fill them with meaning” (p. 39). *Consumption* involves the decoding of messages by audiences (p. 40). Curtin and Gaither indicated that “representation is the form an object takes and the meanings encoded in that form” (p. 40). Curtin and Gaither suggested that because objects do not have meaning in and of themselves, meaning is socially constructed. Though each of these parts provides insight into the study of culture; I will focus solely on representation given the focus of this study.

**Representation.** Hall (n.d.) suggested that representation is not simply a reflective image of itself. It has a deeper, larger meaning. For example, while some may think that the image of a well-dressed Black man on the cover of *GQ* magazine simply conveys a message about what the man is wearing; the magazine staff could have intended to communicate a much deeper meaning with the image. It is important to understand that in this capitalist, technologically-rich world, “every image created by those who control the media, is created with a larger purpose in mind” (Hall, n.d., p. 4). The media incorporate ideologies (i.e. beliefs, ideas, values, behaviors, and relationships) of the media into every image, but viewers must interpret those images.

Hall (1997) also suggested that “representation is the production of meaning through language” (p. 16). However, in television, representation refers “to the ways in which visual images and sounds create certain kinds of assumptions about the identity and characteristics of particular groups of people within society” (Boyd, 2008, p. 170). Wohn (2011) suggested that representations or images “help form a cognitive schema, in which images can build a set of impressions in an individual’s brain that are stored and accessed at a later time and these images contribute to the perpetuation of subtle prejudices” (p. 200). To explore this notion further, I will discuss systems of representation.

**Systems of representation.** A system of representation “organizes, clusters, arranges and classifies concepts” (Hall, 1997 p. 17). Hall (1997) referred to two systems of representation: mental and language.

Mental representation involves the pictures constructed in our thoughts, which symbolize the world. According to this system, an individual can construct a mental image of an object without having the actual physical object in her presence. Mental representations help us to interpret our surroundings in a meaningful way. We all have a mental conceptual system for understanding our surroundings, but our conceptual systems may vary from one person to another. A shared language must exist in order to trade or exchange meanings from person to person.

Language is the second system of representation, and is “the key repository of cultural values and meaning” (p. 1). Language is the genesis or the beginning of the production of meaning, because we produce and exchange meaning through language. Language allows us to convert our mental conceptual systems into a mutually understood

language. It is important to note here that language, in the context of cultural studies, is a broad term. Language is not just the spoken or written word; it also includes visual images used to convey meaning, facial expressions and gestures, clothing, and music.

Language is a critical part of the “circuit of culture,” because it serves as the vehicle through which we convey and exchange ideas and feelings. Language helps members of society make sense of the world, and allows us to apply meaning through a shared understanding of signs. Individuals that belong to the same culture must share a way of interpreting the “signs of language” (i.e. words, spoken sounds, or visual images) to successfully exchange meaning (p. 19).

Interpretation requires access to both systems of representation. For example, if an individual sees a cow in a field, the individual would need a mental conceptual system that correlates the cow in the field with the concept of a cow. They would also need the language system to label the animal a cow.

Signs (i.e. words, spoken sounds or visual images) often receive their meaning through repeated use by powerful groups or individuals that give the definition credibility. These reoccurring meanings become a part of societal memory and form a collection of themes from which members of society may draw. Many times, we use these themes unconsciously, and this unconscious use is what makes “signs, symbols, and culture in general ideological” (Hall, n.d., p. 5). This idea of signs receiving meaning through powerful groups or individuals is hegemony.

## **Hegemony**

Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) defined hegemony as the power and social dominance that one group exerts over another in an effort to “impose their

visions, interests, and agendas on society as a whole” (p. 381). Dates and Mascaro (2005) indicated that the group that holds the power “rule[s] as the thinkers and producers of ideas, and the ideas are the ruling ideas of the time” (p. 52). When applying this point to “race relations in the U.S., a comparable model of imbalanced cultural power is evident” (p. 52). This concept is significant because racial representations help mold public opinion, hold it in place, and set the agenda for public discourse on the race issue in the media and in society.

For example, since the 1800s, due to negative labeling and hegemonic framing; radio and television have depicted Black males in some of the most dehumanized ways. This type of representation has had crippling effects on this population (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Bogle, 2001; Entman, 2006; The Opportunity Agenda, 2011; Rada, 2000). Due to its hegemonic nature and “racialized power relations,” (Wright, Darko, Standen & Patel, 2010, p. 543), the media and other forms of art (e.g., music, theater, film) have served to “validate the poor treatment of Black people,” because many American audiences believe that television and film offer fully-accurate representations of racial and ethnic groups in society (Boyd, 2008 p. 1; The Opportunity Agenda, 2011). The next section explores the historical portrayals of African American males on television.

### **Historical Portrayals of African American Males on Television**

Images and portrayals of African American males on television have had a significant influence on public perceptions of this population. To understand how such perceptions are created and able to seep into the belief system of the masses, it is important to recognize that television is a cultural agent. It is a modern day storyteller, much like the griots or oral storytellers of ancient civilizations. Each generation’s

cultural lens shapes the stories told. As such, television is a “provoker and circulator of meanings” (Fiske, 1987, p. 1).

Television programs have the ability to shape and define how we see the world, and they usually align with mainstream beliefs. Television is also an extensive, social institution that has a multifaceted site of power and knowledge within U.S. culture. In this sense, television has a hegemonic nature (Boyd, 2008). Gamson (1992) suggested that the media disseminates the viewpoint of those with significant political and economic power. These power brokers use their influence to shape the media’s focus. The hidden nuance of this system of power and influence is that its subtle presentation makes receivers oblivious to the real process of social construction that is taking place.

**Minstrels.** Before television, there were minstrel shows. These shows consisted of comedic renditions of songs, dances, and theatrical performances designed to poke fun at Black culture. Minstrel shows established the foundation for Black stereotypes in the media. These shows introduced to the public three distinct characterizations of African American males: the Sambo, the Coon (or Zip Coon), and the Buck.

According to Boyd (2008), the Sambo character typically portrayed African American males as house servants. These characters were “docile, but irresponsible; loyal but lazy; and humble, but chronically driven to lying and stealing” (p. 187). The Sambo role had three personalities: Jim Crow, Zip Coon, and Uncle Tom (also referred to as Tom or Uncle Remus). The Jim Crow character represented African American males from the country; rural communities. They were depicted as poor, “slow-thinking and slow-moving” buffoons, whose favorite past time was “sleeping, fishing, and hunting opossums” (p. 188).



The second Sambo personality was Zip Coon. This character was the opposite of Jim Crow. Zip Coon represented the urban, free African American male. Despite his freedom and move to the North, he never understood or fit into his new environment. He was known for his pompous attitude, flamboyant style, womanizing, and his inability to maintain a job and be self-sufficient. The third Sambo personality was the Uncle Tom character. Television shows represented the Uncle Tom character as an old Black man who understood and accepted his place as a Black man in American society. He was a Christian and his White counterparts considered him a “good negro” (Bogle, 2001, p. 4). As such, he was subservient, gentle, and had a child-like charm (Boyd, 2008). Finally, the Buck character was depicted as a brute, hyper-masculine, oversexed, violent savage who was consumed by the notion of sexual engagement with White women (Bogle, 2001; Boyd, 2008).

The Tom persona was the first Black character in American film, and appeared in a major role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853). The Tom and Coon roles also appeared in popular early films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The 1930s and 1940s were the heyday for cinematic depictions of the Tom character. The Buck role was historically very popular and still is today. The Buck character has been portrayed in movies and television since 1933 (e.g., *The Emperor Jones* (1933), *Carmen Jones* (1954), *Porgy and Bess* (1959), *Brown Movies* (1960s), *The Color Purple* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), and *Training Day* (2000) (Bogle, 2001).

**Uplifting the race.** Upon the arrival of television, many African Americans in the U.S. hoped that television would serve as a way for America to see the true essence of the Black community and their contributions to the nation. Given Black Americans

previously had endured a history of stereotypical representations in the arts and media due to “slavery, institutionalized racial oppression, and socially and governmentally condoned colonized status within the U.S.” (Johnson, 2008, p. 167). It is important to note that the origins of these dreams came from great thought leaders like W.E.B Du Bois (*The Souls of Black Folk*) and Booker T. Washington (*Up from Slavery*), whose mission was to “uplift the race” (Brown & Kraehe, 2011, p. 74). These leaders sought to dispel the racist opinions of Black people, particularly Black males, through empowerment and education. Unfortunately, the hopes some African Americans had for television were unrealistic. Despite the evolution of time, ideologies are slow to change, and television shows represented those stagnant views. “Television as a medium, more often, than not, tends to reproduce and maintain society’s generally accepted and dominantly promoted beliefs” (Fiske, 1987, p. 1). Therefore, under this premise, television shows continue to portray African Americans in a negative light.

The hegemonic nature of television brings forth conflict and struggle between the producers and receivers of television messages (Boyd, 2008). The sites of that conflict and struggle are evident in pivotal moments in American history over the last 50 years that related to television, race, and education in the U.S. These defining moments have had significant implications for the portrayal of African American males on television.

**1950s.** The first key moment in this historic struggle related to the portrayal of Black males on television took place during the 1950s, when many believed there would be progress in attempts to resolve longstanding dissension between White and Black citizens in the U.S. The spirit of progress became a reality in 1954, with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the integration of Central High School in Little Rock,

AR by the Little Rock Nine. In the midst of this progressive moment, however, *Amos 'n' Andy*, one of the most stereotypical shows in television history--starring an all Black cast--aired on CBS in 1951.

The *Amos 'n' Andy* show began as a radio program in the late 1920s. It was a success among White audiences for decades. Critics hailed the show as the “finest television ever produced” (Hunt, 2005, p. 11). The characters mimicked “Black dialect” and made an attempt at humorous exploits of Black Americans. In a legal case against CBS, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) said the show dispensed derogatory images of Black Americans. The NAACP also was concerned that White Americans would believe that the characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* were realistic reflections of the Black community. The television version of the show included an all Black cast, which was the first in television. Typically, these types of programs would follow the minstrel show tradition by hiring White actors who would perform in black face (Hunt, 2005).

**1960s.** The second pivotal point in history occurred during the revolutionary period of the 1960s, when the spirit of uprising impacted many viewers’ programming appetites; and network television attempted to deal with race issues head on. After the 1963 March on Washington, CBS responded by producing *East Side/West Side*, starring Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones; and NBC produced *I Spy*, starring Bill Cosby, which aired in 1965 (Boyd, 2008).

Many have referred to the 1960s as the era of Civil Rights and Change in television (Pieraccini & Alligood, 2005, p. 22). Audiences wanted more realism, and demanded programs that reflected the social upheaval in the country. During this period,

“new images of African Americans began to appear in prime time television” (Johnson, 2008, p. 174). African Americans frequently appeared in “serious documentaries about rural poverty, segregation, and the growing Civil Rights Movement” (Appiah & Gates, 1999, p. 183). African Americans also were frequently in the news, due to the racial issues in the South. The public began to challenge the casting of African Americans in demeaning television roles (e.g., portrayed as lazy, untrustworthy, unintelligent, and employed in low-status positions). In the eyes of many viewers, Black entertainers at that time represented the entire Black community. This was a challenge for Black actors who held these roles, because many in the African American community felt the portrayal of some of these characters was inauthentic and derogatory.

Key actors in the Civil Rights Movement began to address these derogatory images, along with the absence of minority characters on TV and unfair hiring practices at networks. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s brought about a presidential commission to examine the effect of “television on the [public’s] perception of minorities” (Mastro, 2000, p. 690). The commission’s findings indicated that portrayals of minorities were both sporadic and stereotypical, and these depictions influenced the way minorities viewed themselves and how they were viewed by the masses.

**1970s.** The third historical moment took place during the 1970s, when new broadcasting rules led networks to change how they “acquired, promoted, and scheduled prime-time programming” (Johnson, 2008, p. 175). This change resulted from the Civil Rights Movement. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, networks developed shows that featured African Americans in roles that rose above negative portrayals of Black people (i.e., Bill Cosby in *I Spy*). African Americans starred and co-starred in films, dramatic

series, and comedies (Appiah & Gates, 1999). This progressive movement enabled television producers to respond to the social upheaval in the 60s and support the work of the Civil Rights Movement (Boyd, 2008).

Many have referred to the 1970s as the era of “ghetto comedies” and blaxploitation films (Pieraccini & Alligood, 2005, p. 29). Blaxploitation films were popular between 1970 and 1979, and typically comprised of low-budget productions featuring Black action heroes. The target audience for these films was African American youth. These films inspired significant controversy, as critics debated their benefit and detriment to the African American community. Some believed that blaxploitation films were beneficial, because they gave African Americans work as actors, writers, and directors in a White, male-dominated industry. Others believed that these films were detrimental, because they promoted negative stereotypical images of African Americans and “led to the destruction of the minds of Black youth” (Briggs, 2003, p. 26). Despite the controversy, it is important to note that blaxploitation films originated from a “commercial impulse” (Lambert, 2003, p. 1). The goal of their production was to appeal to African Americans in order to increase profit margins (Lambert, 2003). MGM proved these types of movies were successful with its production of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, which grossed \$20 million (Briggs, 2003). Gordon Park’s *Shaft* was another popular blaxploitation film, earning an “initial domestic gross of \$7 million” (p. 27).

*Shaft* played a significant role in shaping the Black male identity, and defining what it meant to be masculine and cool (Henry, 2002). The Shaft character was the original Black action hero. He was a “cool Black private investigator” (The Internet Movie Database, n.d.), who straddled the line between the Black and White worlds

(Henry, 2002). The character was so popular and influential that after the release of the movie, young Black youth adopted his walk, style, and lingo (Briggs, 2003). The role was reminiscent of the stereotypical Buck archetype, but this character was significant, because it was one of the first roles where the Black male character did not portray a buffoon. This character, in some respects, was driven by the political element of the Black Power Movement, which supported the character's demeanor and attitude about who he was as a Black man (Henry, 2002).

During late 1970s and early 1980s, television programming began to move away from presenting a fantasy world, where prejudice did not seem to exist, and began to develop programs that dealt realistically with racism (e.g., *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*). In addition, these shows depicted African American characters that demonstrated higher levels of intelligence, a desire to work, and trustworthiness. Despite this move in a more positive direction, the shows often continued to portray Black males as jive-talking buffoons (Appiah & Gates, 1999). For example, in the 1974 television hit *Good Times*, the J. J. Evans character, whose antics fit the Coon archetype, became synonymous with buffoonery. He regularly exhibited a toothy smile, an exaggerated strut, and bugged-eyes. These antics and his trademark phrase "DY-NO-MITE!" made J. J. the featured character. This role also demonstrated behavior reminiscent of the Buck stereotype, as the character seemed in constant pursuit of the opposite sex.

The J. J. Evans character brought elicited significant concern from the two oldest cast members of the show, Ester Rolle and John Amos. On the show, Rolle and Amos played the parents of J. J. and his siblings, Michael and Thelma Evans. Rolle and Amos

were concerned that the J. J. character was rolling back the hands of time, given that *Good Times* (along with *The Jeffersons*) was one of the first shows with an all Black cast to be broadcast on television in the 20 years since the controversial *Amos 'n' Andy Show* (The Museum of Broadcast Communications).

The J. J. Evans character was also significant because it overshadowed the Michael Evans character, J. J.'s younger brother. Michael was smart and had a strong connection to academics, but the show did not promote Michael's academic success as heavily as it did J. J.'s buffoonery, disregard for school, love for the opposite sex, and desire to be cool (The Museum of Broadcast Communications).

**1980s.** The fourth historical moment occurred during the 1980s; with President Ronald Reagan at the helm of the country, and the airing of the first episode of the *Cosby Show* on NBC in 1984. Reagan's election created a significant shift in the nation's racial policies, and the *Cosby Show* represented a shift in the way media portrayed African Americans on television (Hunt, 2005).

In the 1980s, more African Americans began working behind the scenes as writers, directors, and producers; which generated more positive, Black-themed shows like *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. In 1984, *The Cosby Show* presented America with a new image of the African American family. The show portrayed a loving and caring upper-middle class family; where the father was a doctor and the mother, a lawyer. The children, particularly the male child, were studious and never exemplified the negative historical media images typically ascribed to African Americans.

The show became very popular among Black and White viewers, but many Black viewers did not feel the Huxtables reflected the realities and the viewpoints of actual Black families (Fujioka, 2005). Despite this controversy, *The Cosby Show* may have been the first all-Black television show to portray African American males in a non-stereotypic fashion. The Black male characters on the show celebrated academic excellence and fully embraced their ethnic identity.

**1990s-2000s.** The fifth pivotal moment in American history took place in the 1990s and 2000s. A number of key events occurred during these decades that significantly influenced the portrayal of race in the media. In the 90s, reality TV became a phenomenon, and “in the fall of 1999 when the new network television schedule was announced, none of the twenty-six new fall programs starred an African American in a leading role, and few featured minorities in secondary roles,” with the exception of sitcoms (Baynes, 2003, p. 1; Hunt, 2005). In addition, in 2002, under President George W. Bush, *No Child Left Behind* became law. The law was “primarily designed to help the nation's poor and minority children” (Feller & Hefling, 2012). That same year *The Wire* aired on HBO and ran for six consecutive years (2002-2008). In 2008, Barack Obama became the first U.S. President of African descent.

By the 1990s, African Americans working in the television industry reached record numbers. Despite this growth, many of the images of African Americans during this decade continued to perpetuate stereotypes through popular movies like *Boyz N the Hood*, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, and *Menace II Society* (Henry, 2002) and television shows like *South Central*. The public heavily criticized BET, FOX, and UPN for assisting in the promotion of these images (Pieraccini & Alligood, 2005). Through the stereotypical



images in these types of shows, the 1990s took a serious step backwards from the 1980s and the model set by *The Cosby Show*.

The year 2000 and beyond has been labeled the decade of “Diversity and Balance” (p. 68). During this decade, television and film run the gambit. Television shows portrayed negative stereotypical characters like rapper Flava Flav in the reality show *Flavor of Love*;, while actors like Jamie Foxx tested the limits of African American roles by throwing in his hat for consideration to play James Bond and Frank Sinatra (Hinckley, 2008; “Jamie Foxx in the Running to Play Frank Sinatra,” 2009). This historical overview not only provides a context and backdrop for the study, but it also serves as a precursor for the review of *The Wire*. This review will serve as an example for how realism, representation, and the media are connected.

### **The Wire**

*The Wire* is a Peabody Award winning, Emmy nominated, dramatic series that ran for five seasons (2002-2008) on the Home Box Office network (HBO). The show’s creator, David Simon, referred to the program as a “visual novel” (Sodano, 2008, p. 175). Many critics have praised the show, calling it “the greatest television series ever made and one of the most accomplished works of fiction of the 2000s” (p. 5). Tim Goodman (2006), from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, wrote, “*The Wire* on HBO has been one of the great achievements in television artistry, a novelistic approach to storytelling in a medium that rewards quick, decisive and clear storytelling” (p. 1). James Poniewozik (2006), of *Time*, commented, “*The Wire* offers a bird's-eye critique of society” (p. 2). He also offered, “*The Wire* is TV's best--and nearly it's only--drama about race and class” (p. 1).

The academic community has lauded *The Wire* as a “visual media tool that adeptly represents the complexity of social life in an urban context” (Brown & Kraehe, 2011, p. 76). Scholars also have said the show may have something “more poignant to teach the public about societal issues than any published study” (Bennett, 2010, p. 2).

*The Wire* is about powerful systems and “root causes and circumstances that make people’s lives go bad” (Poniewozik, 2006, p. 1). David Simon described *The Wire* as a story about how people in an American city (Baltimore, MD) live together and “how institutions have an effect on those individuals” (Tuggle, 2011, p. 1). The show explored “the tyranny of a number of different institutions, from the local and federal government and the police department to the school system and the media” (Dearth, 2009, p. 9); all of which heavily influenced an impoverished community and fueled rivalries between local gangsters and the drug dealers.

According to Rossow (2009), “*The Wire*, in various ways, gives voice to the Black working/lower class and the inner city Black youth, presenting their perspectives on a range of issues, including their interpretations of what America represents to them” (p. 3). From a cultural studies perspective, the show was unique in that it strived to develop for its audience “moments of understanding where different perspectives and interpretations can be” considered (Rossow, 2009, p. 3). These varied considerations have become apparent through the various critiques, articles, and dissertations on *The Wire* (Sodano, 2008). For example, Young Hoon Kim (2011), from the University of Alberta, wrote a dissertation on *Consensus narratives on the state of exception in American TV shows*. Kim “explored the political and cultural meanings of four TV shows from the George W. Bush era: *The West Wing* (1999-2007), *Deadwood* (2004-06),

*The Wire* (2002-08) and *Heroes* (2006-10)” (p. 4). Kim “[argued] that the selected American TV shows from the Bush era are consensus narratives that account for America’s understanding of the state of exception paradigm dominant after September 11” (p. 4).

Todd Sodano (2009), from Syracuse University, titled his dissertation, “*All the pieces matter: A critical analysis of HBO’s The Wire*.” In it, Sodano explored how *The Wire* was produced (i.e. written, directed, edited, and cast), and distributed through HBO. He also focused on how the influence of television critics kept the show on for five seasons, despite its low ratings.

In Christopher Love’s (2009) dissertation, titled *Creating tragic spectators: Rebellion and ambiguity in world tragedy*,” he “considers adaptations of Greek tragedy in contemporary novels, television, and theater in order to develop a theoretical and comparative perspective on the possibilities of tragedy today” (p. vi).

In his master’s thesis, *As true as television gets: The Wire and perceptions of realism*, Branden Buehler (2010) sought to understand why audiences quickly labeled the show realistic. Buehler argued that the “perception of realism could be connected to the show’s form, its affect, and its treatment of representation” (p. 1). He also argued that the show might have felt realistic because it was different from other shows in regards to its authentic portrayals.

Scott Rossow concentrated on “how the show represents the gangster image” and attempted to determine how the show “fit into the long line of past gangster representations” in his (2009) master’s thesis, *Can’t knock the hustle: The modernization of the gangster image in The Wire* (p. 6).

David Dearth (2009) titled his master's thesis, *Rage against the machine: Critical perceptions of American democracy through Man vs. The Institution.* Dearth used *The Wire* and other "works of literature and popular media" (p. 4) to explore the idea of "Man vs. the Institution to question traditional ideas of American democracy" (p. 8). He argued that American freedom and democracy are socially constructed myths promoted by popular media (e.g., movies and television). Dearth analyzed *The Wire* and other shows, to "explore examples that contradict" (p. 8) this myth. Dearth argued that *The Wire* and the other shows he analyzed "take a negative view for the potential for social change in America" (p. 8). He concluded his thesis by questioning the purpose of these types of works that contradict the status quo, and suggested that they help inform and identify the problem, which hopefully will create change.

College courses, conferences, and seminars have shared other perspectives on *The Wire*. During the fall semester of 2010, scholars Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson from Harvard created a course on "urban inequality" using *The Wire* as their focus. In a *Washington Post* article, Chaddha and Wilson (2010) stated, *The Wire* does "more than simply tell a gripping story, it shows how the deep inequality in inner-city America results from the web of lost jobs, bad schools, drugs, imprisonment, and how the situation feeds on itself" (p. 1). Those kinds of connections are very difficult to illustrate in academic works.

The University of Michigan responded to *The Wire* by creating a symposium in 2009 entitled, "Heart of the City: Black Urban Life on *The Wire*". The organizers of the symposium wrote, "*The Wire* is an exceptional cultural text from which to examine a wide range of urban issues, to be approached from literary, historical, political, and

sociological perspectives”. Also in 2009, Duke University introduced a course that explored “urbanization, de-industrialization, the ‘ghetto,’ the figure of the queer thug, hip-hop, and many other aspects of urban black experience” (Fairbanks, 2009, p. 1). Middlebury College in Vermont developed a course entitled “Urban America and Serial Television: Watching *The Wire*” (p. 1). This course helped students examine American culture through the lens of television. The University of California, Berkeley, offered a rhetoric course entitled, “What’s So Great About *The Wire*?” (p. 1). The course “examined *The Wire*’s journalistic, novelistic and dramatic roots” (p. 1). A number of scholarly articles on *The Wire* also demonstrate its reach. See *Appendix A* for a listing.

**The writers, the purpose, the intended audience.** Based on the various perspectives on *The Wire* from television critics and the academic community, it is important to explore the intended purpose, audience, and message of *The Wire*, from the perspective of its creator, David Simon, and producer, Edward Burns.

David Simon, the creator of *The Wire*, was not a novice storyteller when he developed the show; in fact, he was quite an accomplished writer and author. Prior to *The Wire*, Simon worked on the network series, *Homicide*. He also worked as a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* for thirteen years, and he authored a book entitled, *Homicide: A year on the killing streets*. This book spawned the NBC series, *Homicide: Life on the street*.

Ed Burns, *The Wire*’s co-executive producer, served twenty years on the Baltimore police department as a detective. He also served as a Baltimore schoolteacher for seven years. Prior to *The Wire*, Simon and Burns co-wrote the HBO mini-series, *The Corner*, which aired in 2000 (Sodano, 2008).

***The purpose.*** Simon and Burn's vision and goal for *The Wire* was simply to tell a good, authentic story. That goal was non-traditional, by television standards. In order to accomplish that goal, they believed it was important to "stay true to the logic" of the story (p. 179). In their efforts to ensure that they met their vision and goal for *The Wire*, Simon and Burns, as well as the other writers of the show, engaged in an expansive and complex process. According to Sodano, Simon provided the following metaphor for how he and his team wrote and produced *The Wire*:

We're building a house here. Every single one of us, all the writers, all the actors, all the crew, all the directors; everything in our bag of tricks, it's all tools in the toolbox. It's not about how often the hammer comes out; it's about the house we're building. So, all the details are essential. (p. 181)

Simon and Burns were very thorough in making strategic decisions about every aspect of *The Wire*--from the selection of cast members to set design, music, and the script (writing and delivery). They believed that everything mattered. Everything related to the show was deliberated planned to tell the story they envisioned. Simon and Burns took this approach because they feared being called frauds for inaccurate depictions. For example, *The Wire* had the largest cast of Black actors, with continuous and starring/co-starring roles, possibly in television history. Simon and Burns addressed this by saying, "we're just trying to reflect Baltimore" (p. 189). When it came down to how the characters delivered their lines to reflect an authentic Baltimore accent and dialect, they "didn't look for the Baltimore when hiring actors for major roles, instead they looked for actors who conveyed the totality of the character with all possible range and credibility" (p. 192). The writers also did research on their characters by spending time observing the people they were writing about and costume designers purchased clothing from local stores for the characters to keep the level of authenticity high.

***The writers.*** *The Wire* certainly straddled the line between reality and fiction, but “Burns disputes any claims that *The Wire* is ‘real’ “ (p. 205). Burns stated, “you can’t capture real unless you’re doing a documentary, and even that is suspect” (p. 205). Burns’s statement reflected his understanding that authenticity is a social construction; it is all interpretation. Even though *The Wire* is a fictional story, the writers wanted to appeal to and authentically reflect the lives of the people about whom they wrote. The writers were not particularly interested in the opinions or validation of individuals outside of that world. As such, they incorporated the stories of people they had met throughout their lives in many of “the stories in *The Wire*” (p. 184). So the question becomes, for whom was *The Wire* written?

***The intended audience.*** According to Sodano, Burns stated, “we try to write for the wiretap geek, for the Secret Service, for the FBI. The people in the street—we’re writing for the gangsters...the police department” (p. 198). Despite these intentions, *The Wire* has received criticism because the show employed few Black writers. As such, how could the show truly capture the essence of the community they were trying to depict? Simon responded to this criticism with the following statement, “If we tried to tell these stories, and they were not credible, and if the voices weren’t sufficiently authentic, we’d have our heads handed to us – not only by social critics and literati, but by viewers, by regular folks” (p. 203). Simon does not directly address the question about the disparity in the writing room, but it is very important to note that Simon indicated that “*The Wire* is not a chronicle of African American life in America” (p. 204). In fact, Simon stated that *The Wire* “has precious little to do with race. It is about class, and capitalism, and how money and power route themselves... This is a show about the other America” (p. 189).

This statement may suggest that Simon feels it did not matter who wrote the story, as long as they got it right.

Simon and Burns tried to convey the focus of the story in a universal way, so that it would appeal to anyone who viewed it. Their hopes for the audience of the show were, regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic background, a person would be able to understand and have compassion for the characters and their situations. To give the story life and to personify the experiences of people in any urban city, Simon and Burns wrote what they labeled as a “visual novel” (p. 175). Simon stated, “*The Wire* was conceived as an attempt at literature” (p. 178). As such, critics have compared *The Wire* to the great works of Shakespeare and Dickens, but Simon noted that he drew from Greek mythology to create the series and illustrate the dominant conflicts in the show.

*The Wire* was about the tensions “between individuals and the institutions they served” (p. 177). The overall message of the series was that “people are not greater than the institutions they serve, the institutions are always bigger, and the institutions are at fault” (185). As a result, the characters never achieve a level of success recognized by common societal standards. On the contrary, many of the characters succeeded by engaging in unlawful activities as a means of survival.

Simon believed that most Americans want to subscribe to two dominant myths about society. The first myth is, “if you work hard; you will succeed.” The second myth is, “if you work hard, and ‘do what you’re supposed to do,’ you will be rewarded” (p. 186). Simon does not believe the second myth is true. As he stated, “hard work doesn’t always pay off” (p. 187). Simon used *The Wire* to challenge this myth.



Critics have faulted *The Wire* for being cynical (Atlas & Drier, 2008; Chaddah, Wilson & Venkatesh, 2008), but Simon says he is contemptuous about the institutions *The Wire* portrayed; not the people the characters tried to depict. The show explicitly illustrated this notion in the portrayals of its characters. All of the characters, regardless of which side of the law they were on, were challenged by the same “human condition”-- the “institutions and the bureaucratic forces within Baltimore” (Sodano, 2008, p. 192). Giving all the characters equal footing in this regard, caused the lines between “good and evil to be blurred” (p. 170 ); which stirred up sometimes confusing emotions of sympathy for the criminal and feelings of hatred for the police officer. At the root, Simon and Burns wanted *The Wire*’s audience to see the humanity in the characters and understand that all people matter. According to Sodano “it is Simon’s hope that the viewer – who may be white or black, male or female, rich or poor – appreciate stories told about compelling characters on either side of the law” (p. 193). Given these compelling stories centered primarily on African American male characters, it is necessary to discuss hegemonic masculinity in relation to visual media and this population.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity in Media Representations of Black Males**

Hegemonic masculinity is “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (Eguchi, 2009, p. 195). Hegemonic masculinity “represents a benchmark against which men scrutinize their identities” (Ricciardelli, 2010, p. 64). Therefore, it can be seen “as a role, status set, perspective, behavior or personal characteristic” (p. 64). In the U.S., we commonly view hegemonic masculinity in terms of “toughness and competitiveness” (Eguchi, 2009, p. 195).

If we apply hegemonic masculinity specifically to heterosexual African American males, the most popular mental images Americans would conjure up are of athletes and gangsters/criminals (Gray 1995). Contemporary images may include rappers and movie stars. These representations are a common part of visual media and social discourse about African American males; but regardless of how Black heterosexual masculinity is conceptualized, it is still the same “Black body” upon which warring claims of Black masculinity are waged (p. 2).

Gray (1995) suggested that “Black heterosexual masculinity has been used in policy debates, in television news, and popular film representations” (p. 3). Black males like Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, Troy Davis, and most recently Trayvon Martin, have served as a negative symbol of Black masculinity; and their images have served to promote panic about crime, which led to their assault or their demise. The experiences of these men serve as an example of how society consistently considers Black masculinity to be the “logical and legitimate object of surveillance and policing, containment, and punishment” (p. 5).

The treatment and perception of Black masculinity play out in various societal institutions, including the classroom. Many times, in districts with high numbers of African American pupils, these students are suspended and expelled at a higher rate than White students; and educators in these districts often assign African American boys to Special Education classes more frequently than their peers (Schott Foundation, 2006 & 2010; Thomas et al., 2009). The Schott Foundation stated (2010) the following:

African American male students are punished more severely for the same infractions as their White peers. On average, more than twice as many White male students are given the extra resources of gifted and talented programs by their schools as Black male students. Advanced Placement classes enroll only token

numbers of Black male students, despite The College Board urging that schools open these classes to all who may benefit. In districts with selective, college-preparatory high schools, it is not uncommon to find virtually no Black male students in those schools. Finally, the national percentage of Black male students enrolled at each stage of schooling declines from middle school through graduate degree programs. (p. 4)

A wealth of research reinforces the notion that teachers' expectations and their relationships with students are one of the key factors of academic success and positive behavioral outcomes for students. Despite this data, African American students still experience low expectations, poor relationships, and negative perceptions from their teachers (Campaign for High School Equity, 2010; DeCuir-Gundy, 2009; Fashola, 2005; Ferguson, 2003; Good & McCaslin, 2008; Good & Nichols, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Strayhorn, 2008; Thomas et al., 2009).

For example, Neal et al. (2003) (as cited in Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, 2009), reported that White teachers responded negatively to demonstrations of cool pose. According to this study, White teachers perceived Black male students with movement styles and cultural expressions illustrative of popular African American culture (e.g., stroll walk, neighborhood jargon) to be higher in aggression, lower in academic achievement, and more in need of special education services (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 185).

The literature also indicates that despite the teachers' race, they typically viewed these types of expressions negatively. However, it is important to note that the reasons some White and Black teachers view these expressions negatively are quite different. Some Black teachers understand these expressions, but they tend to encourage these students to demonstrate more mainstream behavior. These teachers believe that African American cultural expressions are misunderstood and rejected by the masses and that if

African American youth assumed a more Eurocentric way of behaving; they would be perceived better and would therefore perform better in school (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002).

This example draws a link between culture and academic success for Black students (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). Given that cool posing is a cultural practice, its characteristics have the potential to influence leadership and academic ability (Cross, 2004, 2008). Unfortunately, the media has narrowly framed cool pose and used it to perpetuate stereotypical images of young Black males. As a result, society now demonstrates a marked lack of understanding and awareness of the uses and benefits of cool pose.

Rejection and misunderstanding of a student's cultural background can also impact that student's identity and motivation to learn. A lack of acceptance restricts African American males' ability to use the language and behaviors that are culturally acceptable to them to reach academic success (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002). This rejection creates an increased sensitivity to rejection and forces some African American youth, particularly African American boys, to create harmful coping mechanisms that feed into stereotypic images of themselves. One such coping mechanism could be the more aggressive form of cool posing (Thomas et al., 2009).

### **Cool Pose**

The cool pose theory, as described by Richard Majors and Janet Billson in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, is a "presentation of self many Black males use to establish their male identity" (Majors & Billson, 1993, p. 4). It is also "designed to render the Black man visible and to empower him; it eases the worry and

pain of blocked opportunities” (p. 5). Osborne (1999) described cool pose<sup>2</sup> as an established or prescribed way to achieve manhood that helps African American males deal with and survive in the oppressive environments that they experience in every aspect of social life, including U.S. schools.

Connor (2003) described cool as a lifestyle. Cool is vital to a young Black males’ identities. It is a façade, a mask, used to push away any distinction of being a second-class citizen. Cool pose is a way of showing “competence, high self-esteem, control and inner strength that helps them to hide self-doubt, insecurity and inner turmoil” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 5).

Majors and Billson suggested that cool gives masculinity a stamp of authenticity. Relinquishing cool is “equivalent to being stripped of identity and being defenseless in a hostile environment” (p. 29). The relationship between cool and masculinity is one-dimensional; if cool fails, “masculinity fails” (p. 28). Connor (2003) further suggested that cool is “perhaps the most important force in the life of a Black man in America” (p. 1).

Some African American males display cool pose through specific behaviors; such as speaking in popular vernacular (e.g., current slang, Ebonics), posturing oneself physically, using hand gestures and facial expressions, adopting a particular style of dress, being sexually promiscuous, and embracing hip-hop culture (Patterson, 2006; Wester, Vogel, Mei & McLain, 2006). More aggressive approaches to cool pose can result in what appears to be hostile behavior, which generates the appearance of toughness or rebellion. This appearance may be a façade; as there may not be a true connection with such attitudes or behavior. This tough front is simply an attempt to

---

<sup>2</sup> I will use Cool Pose and Cool interchangeably from here forward.

regain or maintain feelings of self-worth and respect (Dance, 2002; Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, 2009). It is important to note that though these are symbols of cool; cool is much deeper than such codes of behavior.

The art of being cool has always played a vital part in the Black community (Connors, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992). Researchers believe the concept of cool dates back to 2000 to 3000 B.C., with its roots originating in Nigeria. During this time, African peoples expressed cool in many of the ways it is expressed today, through oral culture, character building, artwork, linguistics, dance, initiation rituals, warrior cults, mating rituals, and good health. The ancient idea of cool was to have a “sense of control, symmetry, correct presentation of self, and sophistication” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 57).

It is conceivable that the concept of cool evolved into a coping mechanism or a survival tool with the institution of slavery. During slavery, cool became a mask that evolved from a way of exhibiting sophistication to a way of hiding terror, loathing, and uncertainty to cope with the daily challenge of escaping death (Majors & Billson, 1992). Today, it is also possible that the duality cool pose presents for young African American males could create a quandary related to identity and self-concept. Wester et al. (2006) discussed this quandary in terms of gender roles. They suggested that cool pose stemmed from the intertwined effects of warring messages about gender roles and racism. The notion is that if African American males attempted to meet the gender roles set by American (Eurocentric) society, they were likely to aggravate the gender roles set by the African American community (Afrocentric). Adhering to the rules set by White America comes at a huge cost for some Black men; one that many are not willing to pay. This

conflict could be quite a challenge for some young, impressionable African American males, and may leave them in a place of uncertainty, with no definition of manhood.

Typically, boys learn about the rules of cool from their fathers or father figures. Men pass down these rules from generation to generation. If the father/father-figure is not present, the streets or the media will serve as the teacher. These sources of information typically teach the mastery of cool as the measure of complete manhood (Connor, 2003).

Most Americans subscribe to a capitalistic belief that defines manhood by an individual's achievement, money, and possessions (Connor, 2003). However, many Black males are living in poverty and without access to any of these things. How, then, can they achieve the status of manhood in society's eyes or in their own? Because of the mental power, determination, and survival instincts of African American males, this quandary ignited a need to create a new reality, which would allow them to live free, despite their circumstances. In that spirit, contemporary forms of cool emerged. The danger with the creation of this new reality is that many now associate manhood with being cool and cool is a misunderstood and "incredibly distorted" concept in the minds of many White Americans (p. 12). White Americans often relate cool to rebellion and scandalous behavior. Therefore, they tend to vilify cool mannerisms.

In her book, *What is cool? Understanding Black manhood in America*, Connor identified four types of cool: revolutionary cool, middle-class cool, electronic cool, and street cool. According to Connor, Revolutionary cool focused on "history and survival mostly beginning in the 1960s, when knowledge and intelligence were the keys to being cool" (p. xiv). Middle-class cool related to middle-class Black males' desire to have

White America recognize and respect that their success is the result of “intelligence and hard work,” and not the product of affirmative action (p. xvii). Because the other models of cool are contrary to the middle class culture, Black males redefined cool to meet their specific needs in the middle-class world (e.g., the need to be admitted and succeed in college, the need to pursue a career, the need to get a promotion).

Connor further explained that electronic cool related to “finding voices and heroes on radio in the 1950s” and on television today (p. xvii). Interestingly, many view this model of cool as a commodity. As such, many desire and execute it to acquire wealth. Connor also indicated that “culture is the pervasive concept” in street cool (p. xiv). Teenagers in the Black community exhibit street cool through, “music, dance, language and violence,” but these elements of cool are much deeper than they appear (p. xiv). In fact, street cool involves an intricate system of unspoken understanding.

Power is the common thread that weaves together these four models of cool. In each of these models, “cool is a demonstration of the Black males’ ability to convey power” (p. 34). These models also suggest that cool is a form of hegemonic masculinity, as described by Ricciardelli (2010). All of these models are important, but street cool is most relevant to this study.

**Street cool.** Connor (2003) suggested that out of the four models of cool, street cool is the model that is “angry, daring, impulsive...and deals the most in style and symbols” (p. 19). On the streets, individuals must convey cool quickly, because the streets are a dangerous, uncontrolled environment. Street cool is first conveyed through appearance, then through attitude, and finally through the ability to defend oneself. Learning this rule could be the difference between life and death on the street. This death



could be physical or social. Black males who are not able to convey cool quickly on the street will experience constant challenges and will spend their entire existence proving to their male peers that they are cool.

One of the complexities of cool is that it is a title given to Black males by their male peers. It is not a title a Black male could give to himself; “he has to be anointed cool” (p. 31). Black males also do not receive the title based on basic demonstrations of cool, like types of clothing or certain ways of talking. An individual can use symbols of cool, but the symbols do not make an individual cool. Cool is much deeper. It is confidence; it is being a leader; it is being unafraid; it is strength. The symbols are just decorations that drape the foundations of cool.

Unfortunately, many young Black males become engrossed in the symbols of cool; and as a result, find themselves entangled in the drug trade or other illegal activities. The “drug culture presents all kinds of avenues for demonstrating manhood” (p. 36). It allows Black males to acquire material goods, “women, and power” (p. 36). Black males pay the price to acquire those things through heightened levels of cool--higher stakes, more risks, and the myth of invincibility becomes prevalent. These high stakes ultimately lead to prison or death.

In the drug world, ideas about acquiring a better life through legitimate means like education usually are not a consideration, because many may perceive education as more of a middle-class pursuit, and middle-class has never been cool by street standards because of its association to White American culture. This perception of the middle-class may support the notion that being a student, particularly a good student, is not cool (Chaddha & Wilson, 2011; Osborne, 1999). Some sociologists believe the street cool

culture of young Black men is too gratifying to give up for the sake of focusing on academic pursuits. Living under the street cool model may be fulfilling and could bring a great deal of respect in some circles (Patterson, 2006). Young Black men may feel this form of cool is the only way for them to feel respected and viewed as a valuable human being.

For many poor, young Black males, the street is their classroom; “the streets are a school of life” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 86). Therefore, young African American males see school as irrelevant. It is just something you are supposed to do. Majors and Billson interviewed activist H. Rap Brown, who discussed his early years in the ghetto. He explained that the streets were where “young bloods” sought and gained control and where they receive their most relevant education. Brown explained the lessons he learned in the streets:

I learned how to talk in the streets, not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit. Sometimes I wonder why I ever bothered to go to school. Practically everything I know I learned on the corner. (p. 86)

The media regularly exemplifies the dichotomous relationship between cool and academics across racial lines. For example, the March 2010 edition of GQ magazine, with basketball star Kobe Bryant on the cover, displayed a Diesel ad (a popular clothing line) that promoted Diesel’s new campaign slogan, *Be Stupid*. This four-page ad presented cool, good looking, fashionably dressed White young adults sitting on a bench in a downtown area. The first two pages of the ad stated, “Smart Critiques. Stupid Creates.” The ad continued on the reverse side of the page. The pages were all black, and on one side, the text simply stated, “Be Stupid.” On the other side it read, “Smart Has the Brains, Stupid Has the Balls.”

The Diesel ad suggested that cool was synonymous with a lack of intelligence. It also clearly demonstrated hegemonic masculinity, showing the connection between cool and mainstream culture, and indicated corporate support of cool personae (Patterson, 2006). The ad showed that the media is promoting cool to a specific audience, and showed how such advertisements have the potential to eat away at the foundation of education and promote failure.

**Cool pose and historical tropes of African American males.** Scant research has explored visual representations like the one above, related to African American males and education, but Brown and Kraehe (2011) attempted to perform this type of analysis. They conducted a study using “textual analysis conducted in the critical visual studies tradition” to explore “how *The Wire* positions Black males in the local and larger social milieu” (p. 73). They also considered the implications of using popular visual media, specifically situated around representations of Black masculinity, as a pedagogic tool for multi-cultural teacher education. The basis of the study was “visual media and popular culture play an important role in the construction of social knowledge and thus can operate as an education tool” (p. 74).

The study was presented in an article entitled, *Sociocultural knowledge and visual re(-) presentations of Black masculinity and community: Reading The Wire for critical multicultural teacher education.*” The article appeared in a special issue of a relatively new journal called *Race Ethnicity and Education*. Through this study, Brown and Kraehe argued that while *The Wire* offers “a more complex rendering of the Black male, it simultaneously presents a myopic representation of the Black man and his place in the larger Black community” and presents “deficit-oriented knowledge” (p. 73). They go on

to offer a warning about the use of *The Wire* or any other “popular visual media” that falls in this category, as a pedagogic tool for multicultural teacher education.

Multicultural teacher education is used to give teachers vital information related to the “social, cultural, political, and economic histories and conditions that shape individuals, communities and broader social reality, in order to better serve students of color” (p. 74).

Brown and Kraehe explained why the representation of African American males and masculinity matter in relation to education. They indicated that many Black males are “labeled and tracked as having behavior problems in school, school officials read and make decisions about Black male students based on cultural images of Black maleness, and social discourse frames African American males as criminals or endangered species” (p. 74). The education arena is just a microcosm of how society as a whole represents and views Black males.

Brown and Kraehe went on to discuss the attempts of Black intellectuals like Frederick Douglas and W.E.B DuBois, during the nineteenth/early twentieth century, to “uplift the race” by focusing on educational pursuits (p. 74). The belief was that as African Americans acquired an education, society would change its dominant and negative perceptions them. They discussed other historical components of how visual media has represented Black males, but I will cover that work extensively later in the chapter. To sum up their discussion, Brown and Kraehe suggested that the way visual media represented the Black male are represented “[spoke] to the way dominant, socially mainstream discourses construct and imagine him” (p. 75) and the way he is imagined directs how he is treated socially (e.g., policy, employment, education).

In their study, Brown and Kraehe specifically focused on how “three specific characterizations play out in *The Wire*; the street thief, the white collar professional, and an at-risk urban youth” (p. 76). The characterizations were identified because the researchers thought that “these personas could easily fall into the good-bad motif often found in media portrayals and in political concerns around Black community and responsibility” (p. 76). To make sense of the presentations they observed in *The Wire*, the researchers pulled from “longstanding stereotypical tropes and counter-tropes used to characterize Black people” (p. 77). In reviewing *The Wire*, the researchers noticed that the images in the show reflected the historically “stereotypical, racist tropes [and counter-tropes] of Black masculinity” (p. 78). This combination in representation makes the characters in *The Wire* non-traditional and complex by television standards.

Brown and Kraehe further explained that for decades “scholars have identified a set of common stereotypical, racist tropes used to depict Black Americans in the media,” and 19 of those tropes were identified by Lawrence Reddick in 1944 (p. 78). They used six out of the eleven stereotypical tropes and two counter-tropes identified by Reddick. The stereotypical tropes included “the devoted servant, the sexual superman, the petty thief, the unhappy non-white, the social delinquent, and the mental inferior” (p. 77).

The *devoted servant* represents the hard-working Black person who is devoted and loyal to serving White people and their interests, while posing no threat to, nor seeking to challenge, the existing status quo. The *sexual superman* is a Black man who is depicted as a sexual object, while the *petty thief* engages in small time criminal activity. The *unhappy non-White* is the Black person who is perpetually unhappy, but remains powerless to alter her/his condition. The *social delinquent* engages in socially unacceptable behavior, including criminal activity. She/he is seen as deviant and outside of social respectability. Finally, the *mental inferior* is positioned as ignorant and intellectually deficient in relation to Whites. (p. 78)

Counter-tropes were operating simultaneously to the stereotypical tropes during the twentieth century. Brown and Kraehe argued that these tropes opposed racist narratives and images of Black Americans and represented freedom. The researchers point to two historic counter-tropes that “operated alongside the dominant, stereotypical representations found in the characters they analyzed in *The Wire*—the *trickster* and the *bad man*” (p. 79). The *trickster* refers to an unassuming individual who is able to con his “more powerful opponent through stealth, cleverness, and cunning” (p. 79). The *bad man* “invokes the strong hero who is an outlaw. This character is “outwardly strong and feared by his friends and adversaries” (p. 79).

Brown and Kraehe analyzed three African American male characters in *The Wire* that represented three of the identified tropes. The characters included Lieutenant Cedric Daniels as the *trickster*, Omar Little as the *bad man*, and Namond Brice as *not tricky enough, not bad enough*. Through their analysis of these characters, Brown and Kraehe concluded that *The Wire* presented many nuances of Black masculinity, but it was difficult to ignore that the show used traditional tropes to create the characters’ personas. The specific tropes that played out in the characters analyzed in the study include “fear/subservience, sexual prowess, social deviancy and at-riskness” (p. 85). Interestingly, underneath this outer layer, these Black male characters were characterized simultaneously as “strategic” and “intelligent” in an attempt to gain “freedom and humanity” by rising above or redefining the “narrow social boxes in which they seemingly fit in” (p. 86).

Despite these complex character portrayals in *The Wire*, Brown and Kraehe argued that the show did not do much for teachers who needed sociocultural knowledge

about the Black community. They suggested that the show still presented “Black males, their families and the larger community as deficient, deprived, and lacking cultural resources and this positions the Black male as troubled, in need of rescue from someone outside of the Black community, as incapable of learning or succeeding” (p. 87). Despite their issues with *The Wire*, they did not dismiss *The Wire*’s value. They believed it was rich for “discussion, analysis and critique” (p. 87).

### **Framing the Study**

Brown and Kraehe’s position on *The Wire* is clear, but the goal of my study was to extend their study. I explored and interpreted the cultural messages conveyed about masculinity and academics through four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*. I accomplished this goal by using dimensions of cool pose and relevant stereotypical and counter-troupes used in the Brown and Kraehe study. To this end, I identified dimensions of cool pose as if they were tropes in the literature. Second, I confirmed that the tropes identified by Brown and Kraehe relate to cool pose by running queries in NVivo 9. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how the dimensions of cool pose related to the tropes identified by Brown and Kraehe.

In Table 1, I have outlined the relationship between the tropes presented by Brown and Kraehe and three dimensions of cool pose.

**Table 1.** Historical Tropes and Cool Pose

<b>Brown and Kraehe (2011) Tropes</b>	<b>Cool Pose School/Street</b>
Social Delinquent (Traditional Trope)	Masculinity (Street Cool)
Mental Inferior (Traditional Trope)	Male Identity
Trickster (Counter-Trope)	Masking

The literature suggests the “*social delinquent* engages in socially unacceptable behavior, including criminal activity” ( p. 78). This trope closely relates to the street cool model, or a concept I broadly label as “masculinity.” As stated above, individuals display street cool by behaving in an “angry, daring, impulsive” manner and can appear hostile, tough, rebellious, and scandalous (Connor, 2003, p.19). Like the other dimensions of cool pose, street cool is a mode of survival on the street. One other component to street cool that is relevant to this study is class.

Connor indicated that street cool is first conveyed through appearance, then through attitude, and finally through the ability to defend oneself. Having material possessions (e.g. trendy clothing and electronic devices) suggests a certain class level on the street; “your appearance establishes you level of cool” (p. 30). Some African American males living in poverty are not able to legally afford these symbols of cool; therefore, some may turn to criminal activity to acquire these items. The literature supports the connection between the class dimensions of cool and the social delinquent trope.

Brown and Kraehe (2011) suggested that the media positioned the *mental inferior trope* as ignorant and intellectually deficient in relation to Whites. The dimension of cool pose that relates to this trope is what I broadly label as male identity. Cool pose refers to the “presentation of self that many Black males use to establish their male identity” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4). “Cool pose [renders] the Black man visible” in an oppressive environment (p. 5). As stated above, some middle-class Black males desire to have White America recognize and respect that their success is the result of “intelligence and hard work” and not the product of affirmative action (Connor, 2003, p. xvii). Even



though many consider this notion a middle-class issue, the desire to be visible and respected as intelligent is a common thread for all dimensions of cool.

The *trickster* is a counter-trope that refers to an unassuming individual who is able to con his “more powerful opponent through stealth, cleverness, and cunning” (Brown & Kraehe, 2011, p. 79). The dimension of cool pose that relates to this trope is what I broadly label as masking. Majors and Billson (1992) described cool pose as a mask, an “ironclad façade,” a “carefully crafted performance that delivers a single, critical message of pride, strength, and control” (p. 4, 28). They also suggested that “Black males who use cool pose are often chameleon-like in their uncanny ability to change their performance to meet the expectations of a particular situation or audience” (p. 4). Majors and Billson’s description supports the relationship between the masking dimension of cool pose and the trickster trope.

I conducted a textual analysis for this study. Textual analysis is one way to gain meaning from media text. One of the premises of this approach is there are no correct interpretation; only many possible interpretations of text (McKee, 2003). As indicated in *Table 1*, there is some evidence of a relationship between cool pose and the historical tropes identified by Brown and Kraehe (2011). Through the observation of four African American student characters in *The Wire*, I interpreted the extent to which cool pose and the historical tropes are alike or different; which helped me to identify cultural messages conveyed about masculinity and academics through the four characters.

### **Chapter 3: Design and Methodology**

In this chapter, I discuss the research design and methods used during this study. I will begin by presenting the research question that guided this study. Next, I will outline the research design and my rationale for choosing to conduct a textual analysis. Then, I will discuss the data collection and analysis methods I utilized. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by discussing critical validity, transferability, and the ethical issues.

#### **Research Question**

I have had an interest in the experiences of African American male students for many years, particularly how these students may come to understand the world and their place in it--as students and as men. After working in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) National Education Department and the Schott Foundation for Public Education, I began to understand more about the educational issues that affect these students. I increasingly became aware of the need for new research that provides a deeper understanding of the connection between masculinity and education and the role television may play in shaping these African American males' perceptions of themselves as students. As such, I decided that my dissertation would focus on the representation of African American male students in television.

This study is not just about portrayals and representations; it is about societal constructs about African American male students. To explore these constructs, I decided that conducting a textual analysis, using a cultural studies perspective, would be the appropriate method for answering one main research question:

- What cultural messages are conveyed about masculinity and academics through the portrayals of four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*?

## **Research Design**

In this section, I will describe my choice of research methodologies and textual analysis approach. I also will provide a rationale for my choices.

**Rationale for qualitative methodology.** This research study was a textual analysis conducted in the critical cultural tradition (Mckee, 2001, 2003; Rose, 2001). This study explored the cultural messages about African American male students conveyed through television shows, and focused specifically on the representation of this population in *The Wire*. The current discourse and literature on young African American male students focuses primarily on four main areas: education reform, criminal justice reform, economic development, and health (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute, 2006; Schott Foundation, 2009; The Ford Foundation, 2008; Twenty-First Century Foundation, 2005). I conducted this study to extend the current literature to include media representations and discourse about African American male students.

Creswell (2007) stated that, “we conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored” (p. 39). He goes on to list additional reasons for conducting qualitative research: there may be a need to study a particular group or population, it may give voice to a silenced group, and it may facilitate “a complex, detailed understanding of an issue” (p. 40). Qualitative research can help to empower or

to study the context of a particular issue. Berg (2009) stated that qualitative researchers are interested in exploring how people learn and understanding themselves and others.

After reviewing the literature on qualitative methodologies, I confirmed my decision of conducting a qualitative study to answer my research question. Utilizing qualitative methods allowed me to conduct a study that will help support efforts to address the educational challenges of African American male students. In the next section, I will share my rationale for using a textual analysis to conduct my study.

**Rationale for textual analysis.** I chose textual analysis to conduct my study for several reasons. First, as McKee (2001) asserted, “textual analysis is the central methodology of Cultural Studies” (p. 1). Textual analysis is a way to collect information on how members of society understand the world. More specifically, it is a methodology used to “understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures understand who they are, and how they fit into the world in which they live” (p. 1). Second, according to McKee, textual analysis is one way to gain meaning from media text. Other approaches tend to be “more standardized, quantitative, and replicable” (p. 16). Third, one of the premises of textual analysis is that there is no *correct* interpretation, meaning there are many possible interpretations of text. Brown and Kraehe (2011) stated the following:

Textual analysis does not seek to find or measure the correct interpretations of text analyzed...The process of meaning-making associated with media textual analysis occurs with a wide expanse of media text, depends heavily on context in which an examined text is embedded (i.e. the entire piece of text examined; the genre of text; the public context in which the text is circulated), and does not ensure that two researchers looking at the same text will walk away with the same analysis. (p. 77)

With this understanding, I confirmed that a textual analysis was the appropriate approach for this study; because to approach my interest from a cultural studies perspective, I needed a flexible approach that could embrace and respond to the various levels and complexities of interpreting text (McKee, 2001). I also needed a methodology that was not rigid and would not limit the study. Finally, I chose the textual analysis methodology because I wanted an approach that would allow me to ask new questions about African American male students that would lead to a different kind of understanding and awareness of their experiences.

The goal of this study is not to find the *correct* interpretation of how *The Wire* portrayed African American male student characters in its fourth season, because “there are no such thing as one correct interpretation of any text, there are only many possible interpretations (p. 4). My goal is to provide one interpretation of that portrayal, which might lead another researcher to offer another interpretation on this topic; therefore further broadening the scope of the literature.

### **Defining the Study**

In this section, I will define the parameters of the study. I will discuss the site selection, sampling decisions, and the levels and units of analysis.

**Access and site location.** The study was situated within the videos of season 4 of *The Wire*. The videos were a realistic site for this study because they were my primary source of data, and they were the best means of acquiring and reviewing the thirteen episodes of season 4 of *The Wire*. This site is also realistic because researchers who conduct textual analysis examine anything that will allow them to make meaning. These

examinations could include books, television programs, films, magazines, t-shirts, furniture, ornaments, etc. (McKee, 2003).

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), a realistic site is one where (a) entry is possible; (b) a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present; (c) the researcher is likely to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; (d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and (e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured (p. 62). The videos of season 4 of *The Wire* meet most of these qualifications. I was able to gain access to all thirteen episodes of season 4 of *The Wire* through the videos. Also, the videos do not present any concern related to the study being conducted and reported ethically or the assurity of data quality and credibility.

**Sampling decisions.** Sampling decisions are crucial for the soundness and stability of any study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Therefore, I made the following sampling decisions to maximize the collection of good data throughout this study.

I chose to examine *The Wire* for several reasons. First, its construction is unique; in that it is a work of fiction, but it draws on real people and real situations. Second, despite low ratings, many critics and fans have deemed it as “one of the greatest television shows of all time” and “the best TV show ever broadcast in America” (Sodano, 2008, p. 1). Third, the academic community has widely embraced the show. Major universities and some high schools use *The Wire* to teach classes in film and media studies, as well as in social science disciplines. Even though *The Wire* is a work of fiction, some scholars feel “its depiction of the systematic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor is more poignant and compelling than that of any published

study” (Bennett, 2010). Fourth, though researchers have explored various aspects of *The Wire* (e.g., politics, economics, journalism); interestingly, few have focused on education (Russo, 2010). Fifth, I chose to focus on season 4 of *The Wire* because it deals directly with public education and the lives of four African American male students. Finally, *The Wire* “allowed for a range and variable levels of analysis and interactions that enabled different approaches and issues to be addressed” (Sharma, 2011, p. 1). Also in an effort to keep the sample size manageable, I selected only one show, one season, and four characters for analysis, based on the criteria previously identified.

### **Level and Units of Analysis**

My units of analysis were four of the main school-aged, African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*. Studying all four characters allowed me to compare and contrast the experiences they portrayed, to give the study more context and grounding. I evaluated season 4 of *The Wire* in its entirety, to identify the episodes with empirically significant visual and verbal text that supported my research question. In addition, I transcribed the empirically significant dialogue that supported my research question.

### **Data Collection Tools**

My textual analysis methodology (McKee, 2001, 2003) and a review of existing studies in the fields of cultural studies (Brown & Kraehe, 2010; Sodano, 2008) guided the data collection process. This inquiry drew data from one source; season 4 of *The Wire*. McKee (2003) suggest that anything from television shows to t-shirts can serve as a data source in textual analysis, as long as it helps to establish meaning. In this study, I relied on one season of one television show (thirteen episodes), and specifically focused on four

central characters. I decided to rely on these data sources because of the need to explore the cultural messages conveyed about masculinity and academics through four African American male student characters. Had the focus of this study been how *The Wire* affected actual African American male students, I would have used other data sources. Observation and transcription were the primary methods of data collection for this study.

Before I began the process of observation and transcription, I developed some assumptions about the African American student characters in *The Wire*. McKee (2001) stated that when performing a textual analysis on a text, it is important to “make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of the text” (p. 3). The process helps the researcher to “understand the role media play in our lives, understand how media messages participate in our cultural construction of the world, and what meanings audiences are making” (p. 3). In this case, I am the audience, but I used my review of the literature to guide my educated guess.

Next, I reviewed and evaluated all thirteen episodes of season 4 of *The Wire* that focused on the four central characters in this study, to identify empirically significant visual and verbal text that supported my research question. After viewing each episode, I transcribed them verbatim to ensure accuracy of the data. I also captured and focused on the dialect of each character, which helped me to make sense of each character. After the transcription process, I observed the videos again, along with the transcriptions, to begin the process of understanding or making sense of the portrayals of the four African American male student characters identified for this study, specifically related to masculinity and academics.



Through my initial observation, I obtained significant contextual information about the identified four characters; which included key data about their academics lives, their relationship to the streets (e.g., gangsters, drug trade), their family lives, and their socio-economic status. Based on this observation, I created twenty-seven categories (nodes/node classifications) in NVivo 9, a computer-based qualitative data analysis program.

I continued with the observation process, in an effort to capture all pertinent categories. During observation, I took descriptive and reflective notes, and wrote memos that included the details about what I was viewing, my reaction to it, and my interpretations (Creswell, 2007). I also solicited feedback from critical friends to help ensure my interpretations of each episode were consistent. Through these notes, hidden insights emerged and transformed the data into a story (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The transcriptions of the videos provided me with rich data that connected to my observations. After I completed the transcription, observation, and categorization processes, I began using the established categories to code the transcripts and observations recorded in memos. I stored all transcriptions and memos on a word processing program and entered them into NVivo 9 for data analysis. I used within-case analysis to study how each character was portrayed individually and cross-case analysis to compare and contrast the portrayal of all four characters.

Finally, in an effort to provide context and reliability to the units of study, I reviewed the available literature on *The Wire* that conveyed the overall intent of the show, and its fourth season, from the perspective of its creator, producers, and writers. I also reviewed the program summaries for each episode of season 4, to determine the

intended roles of the African American male characters selected for the study. This process also helped me to gather background information on the characters that the series otherwise may not have conveyed clearly (e.g., demographic and personal attributes, the nature of the Black male characters' interactions with others in the show).

### **Data Analysis**

In this section, I describe the ways in which I analyzed the data collected for this study. I discuss assumptions, structure and form, standards of quality and validity quality, and research bias.

**Assumptions.** Since this is a qualitative study using a textual analysis methodology, I first had to reflect on my own assumptions or educated guesses about the study (McKee, 2001). I used my literature review as a guide. I assumed that season 4 of *The Wire* would represent African American male students in the same or similar ways that the media historically has characterized this population--as lazy, buffoonish, untrustworthy, hyper-masculine , and irresponsible individuals (Bogle, 2001; Boyd, 2008). I also assumed depictions of African American male student characters in *The Wire* would align with representations of this population in the literature, which presents some teachers and administrators who view Black male students as unintelligent, “higher in aggression, lower in academic achievement, [and] more in need of special education” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 185). As it relates to the concept of *cool*, I assumed the African American male student characters in *The Wire* would demonstrate *cool pose* in a way that is in incompatible with popular perceptions of a good student (Osbourne, 1999, p. 559). I also assumed that the African American male student characters who demonstrated *cool*

would be perceived negatively as students, and those students who were perceived positively as students would not be perceived as being cool (Noguera, 2003).

While I used the review of the literature to guide my assumptions, I could not ignore that my own values and biases, in part, shaped the study's findings. Therefore, I sought to be reflective and question my own assumptions. I will explore my biases later in this chapter.

**Structure and form.** For purposes of structure and form I choose to organize this section based on Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven analytic phases of data analysis: (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report. After I identified my assumptions, I began collecting data through observation and transcription. I spent approximately three weeks viewing all thirteen episodes of season 4 of *The Wire*, to immerse myself in the data and begin the initial process of organizing. It took approximately two months to transcribe each episode, and approximately six months to view the episodes along with the transcriptions to begin coding the data. Through this lengthy process, I began to identify themes and patterns, which I used to create categories for coding in NVivo 9.

As I coded the data, a few simple patterns and themes emerged, which indicated that each of the four identified characters demonstrated cool pose, but in different ways. The data also showed that even though the characters lived in the same community, their class level was different; therefore, their academic and social experiences were different. Third, although the characters were in the same grade, their educational levels, academic

experiences, and outlooks varied. After coding using these simple patterns, I reviewed my research question and my conceptual framework, and refined my analysis.

### **Standards of Quality and Validity**

Lincoln (1995) has identified eight standards for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. This study attempted to meet most of Lincoln's criteria.

- a. standards of inquiry community (I followed the guidelines established by researchers to legitimize my research);
- b. positionality (I have been honest about my position and biases as the author of this research);
- c. community (this research will benefit African American male students and education advocates);
- d. voice (the implications of this study give voice to African American male students); and
- e. critical subjectivity (as the researcher in this study, I am aware of my role in the study and continuously reflect in order to grow during the research experience).

**Validity.** Maxwell (2006) identified two types of validity threats: researcher bias and reactivity. I collected data via videotape. I did not engage or observe live participants. Reactivity was not a threat to this study. However, I must address several other threats; including researcher bias, transcription, interpretation, and sample size.

**Researcher bias.** My ethnicity and work background had the potential to create biases during this study. This topic is important to me because it is personal. These young men are a part of my community. They are my cousins, my nephews, my neighbors, and

potentially, my future son-in-law. I firmly believe the well-being of African American males is critical to the health and well-being of the Black family, and to this nation. Based on the educational, economic, and social conditions of African American males, I believe finding untraditional and unique ways to understand and impact this population is critical.

My interest in doing work and research around Black males began during my work with the NAACP National Office as the Assistant Director of Education. During my time with the NAACP, the organization developed the NAACP Call for Action in Education. The Call for Action is a plan to guarantee that all preK-college students have an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. The NAACP identified consistent racial disparities (e.g., resource equity, teacher quality, access to early childhood programs, access to a college-bound curriculum, special education and the overrepresentation of minority children, and suspension and expulsions) in the nation's educational systems. To remove these disparities, the Call for Action recommended that all educational agencies collaborate with community agents to create a Five-Year Educational Equity Partnership Plan for closing racial disparities in achievement by at least 50 percent (Jackson, 2001).

Through the Call for Action, I began to see how Black boys were leading in dropouts, suspensions/expulsions, special education placements, and incarceration rates. Through my work with the NAACP, it became apparent to me that I needed and wanted to do this work. In 2008, I left the NAACP to work for The Schott Foundation for Public Education. One of Schott's claims to fame is their research on Black boys. Schott's reports are used by a number of prominent researchers and politicians. One of the selling

points of this job was that I would be able to participate in explorations of the experiences of Black boys with key researchers and with renowned academic and community-based organizations.

The assumptions about this topic that have resulted from my work experiences include the supposition that there is a need for parental involvement, highly effective teachers, equitable resources, more early childhood education, and more positive role models for young Black males. The assumption that has become important for my research is the need to provide more positive Black male role models and Black male images.

My experiences at the NAACP and The Schott Foundation have made me more of an advocate for social change. Over the years, I have come to realize that it is not acceptable to just sit back and talk about social ills; you must do something about it. As the old adage goes, “If you’re not a part of the solution, you’re a part of the problem.” The advantages of my experience with the NAACP and The Schott Foundation are that I have direct access to the research and researchers of the Schott Black Boys Reports. I also have direct contact with some of the key players who have been doing this work, and I gained experience directly from the NAACP for how to mobilize and advocate for policy change. In addition, because of my work at the NAACP and the connections I made there, my research can be used to support an advocacy effort to address the educational challenges of young African American males. The disadvantages of my work experiences creates biases, goals, and beliefs that could unconsciously limit my universe to just the Black community. Educating young Black males is a collective issue, not a Black issue.

**Transcription.** Marshall and Rossman (2006) identified one major challenge to transcription: It involves the absence of paralinguistic cues. Paralinguistic cues involve the use of punctuation. Punctuation helps to shape the meaning of the written word. The challenge with transcription is that we do not speak in paragraphs, nor do we signal punctuation as we speak (p. 110). When using transcription, it is difficult to capture the essence of punctuation. Researchers indicate that there is no easy way to address this issue.

**Interpretation.** I did not interview the actors, directors, or writers of the selected television shows to determine or verify the meanings behind the discourse of the characters. To address this validity threat, I solicited feedback on the selected discourses from critical friends who are African American males and critical friends who are in the communication and education field.

**Sample size.** This study did not cover a broad range of media outlets (e.g., news, movies, music or music videos). It focused on one season, of one cable television series, on one cable station. I address this validity threat through the nature of the study. This inquiry is a descriptive and exploratory study that focuses on one media outlet during a specific period of time. The study is a precursor that will help to create a foundation for future, more extensive research on this topic.

*Ethical issues.* The main ethical issues related to this study involve transcription and potential copyright issues. As stated previously, researchers have not identified an easy way to address the pitfalls of transcription. To address this issue, I attempted to transcribe the selected dialogue verbatim, but noting and understanding this approach will not completely eliminate the validity threat.

I did not use human subjects in this study. However, given the use of videos as the central source for gathering data, copyright laws could have been a potential ethical concern, but using *The Wire* for educational purposes was permissible.



## Chapter 4: Season Four of *The Wire*

### Background

This study focuses on four African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*: Duquan “Dukie” Weems, Michael Lee, Namond Brice, and Randy Wagstaff. In the fourth season of the program, the characters were between 14 and 15 years old, they all were entering the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at Edward Tilghman Middle School. Most of the boys were the children of drug dealers and drug users. All of the boys came from slightly different backgrounds and experienced some type of neglect, but each boy had a different way of dealing with his challenges. The boys were at a significant point in their lives, where they had to make decisions that would affect the trajectory of their lives. Their options were to continue with school, where they were not learning much under the mandates of *No Child Left Behind*, or go to “the corner”(join the drug trade), where the street was seemingly the real school.

The boys received support from their 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher; Mr. Pryzbelewski; Denis “Cutty” Wise, an ex-con and ex-drug dealer turned boxing coach; and Howard “Bunny” Colvin, a retired police officer turned facilitator of a special program, sponsored by the University of Maryland, for troubled students. Despite this support, some of the boys were not able to recognize or accept the help these adults offered. The boys had avoided the lure of the street, but circumstances mainly related to family issues made the streets more appealing.

### Overview

Season 4 of *The Wire* tackled inner-city public education. The season’s title, “No Corner Left Behind,” was an effort to mock former president George W. Bush’s

educational plan, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The episodes in season 4 portrayed the schools and the community in Baltimore as broken systems, much like every other system explored in *The Wire*. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable in the system had to pay the cost for the failing institutions.

This chapter will provide a contextual foundation for the representations of the four boys in the overall narrative of *The Wire*; therefore, I will provide an overview of season 4 by exploring each relevant episode, specifically focusing on the school system and the families of Duquan, Michael, Namond, and Randy. The boys' school and their families provide valuable context that helps to explain and inform how and why the boys utilized the three dimensions of cool pose highlighted in this study. These portrayals of the boys may not be realistic; they may be stereotypical portrayals, as suggested by Brown and Kraehe (2011); but in the tensions that exist between the portrayal of the boys, the portrayal of the school system, and the interactions between the boys and their families, we begin to see emergent themes that move beyond the scope of historical tropes in the Brown and Kraehe study.

### **Episode 1: Boys of Summer - "Lambs to the slaughter here."**

**The school.** Episode 1 provided a first look at the condition of Edward Tilghman Middle School and the mindset of its administrators. This episode took place during the summer before the fall semester. In one of the first scenes, the school's leaders, Principal Cordell Whithers and Assistant Principal Marsha Donnelly, discussed the condition of Tilghman Middle. As they conversed, Mr. Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski arrived to inquire about a teaching position. Despite their concern with Mr. Pryzbylewski's lack of experience, they hired him because he was an ex-police officer.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly to Principal Whithers:** So, we're short two in Math and four in Science.

(Mr. Pryzbylewski arrives and the administrative assistant introduces him to Principal Whithers and Assist. Principal Donnelly. Assist. Principal Donnelly looks at Mr. Pryzbylewski's resume.)

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** New in math (looking at Principal Whither)...

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I won't have my certificate until next year, but with the resident teacher's program, they said I'd be getting classes because of staff shortages.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Jesus! Lambs to the slaughter here...

**Principal Whithers:** What did you do before you decided to teach, Mr. Pryzbylewski?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I was a police...in the city.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** (standing up with her hand extended) Marsha Donnelly, Assistant Principal...welcome to Edward Tilghman Middle.

Later, Mr. Pryzbylewski attended what appeared to be a teacher preparatory meeting, designed to get teachers motivated for the upcoming school year. An older African American woman, who might have been a master teacher, facilitated the session. As the camera scanned the room, some teachers appeared bored, unmotivated, uninterested. Other teachers were attentive, taking notes, and seemed to be enjoying the session. These teachers nodded their heads, moving in time with the facilitator's singsong voice, and their smiling faces denoted their receptiveness to the information the presenter shared. The principal and vice principal were sitting in on the session with a level of tolerance, but not satisfaction. The facilitator talked to the teachers as if they were in elementary school.

**Facilitator:** Remember that phrasing is the cornerstone in communication with your students. This applies not only to the questions you ask or their comprehension of the lesson, but how they perceive you as an educator...And where does that begin (singsong voice)? Out loud and enthusiastically!!! I.A.L.A.C Let's go..once again.

**Teachers:** (The teachers chime in and say together) I.A.L.A.C .

**Facilitator:** And what are we telling ourselves? (singsong voice)

**Teachers:** I am loveable and capable.

**Facilitator:** Now I see those smiling faces (a happy face appears on the presentation screen).

Later in the presentation, some of the teachers became frustrated with the ineffective, unrealistic preparatory session, and began to express their concerns about the classroom.

**Facilitator:** Another hot zone in the classroom is the pencil sharpener, where children tend to congregate (before the facilitator can continue, a teacher interrupts).

**Teacher 1:** I had a pencil sharpener in my class once, Antwan Grandison ripped it from the wall and threw it at me.

**Teacher 2:** I'd like to know what your lesson plan suggests when Harold Houndshell sends a full set of text books through a closed window. Thank you!!

These excerpts suggest that Edward Tilghman Middle School is in dire need of teachers, but beyond qualified teachers they are in need of teachers who can regulate unruly students. These excerpts also suggest the teachers at Edward Tilghman Middle are frustrated about the reality of their students and the school. To further exacerbate their frustration, they are receiving ineffective training that does not meet their real needs and concerns. Furthermore, the principals seem to be working with the resources they have in order to meet all of the demands of running a school.

**The family.** Episode 1 also provided the first look at the boys' family life.

The episode showed Randy's interactions with his foster mother; Miss Anna. She was characterized as a caring parent with solid rules and expectations for Randy. In turn, Randy was pleasant and respectful toward her. This episode also provided some initial insight into Dukie's life as an abandoned child. The following excerpt shows an exchange between Randy and his foster mother that provides a glimpse at the differences in Randy and Dukie's lives. In this scene, Randy arrived at home after curfew, after a day with his friends Michael, Namond, and Dukie.

**Miss Anna:** Don't make me tell you again; its 9pm sharp boy, and I'm smellin' what has to be urine. What you been in boy?

**Randy:** Well, we were playin wit Dukie today...You know how he be wit his clothes and all.

**Miss Anna:** Well, it's good that child has friends, I suppose.

**Randy:** Yes, ma'am.

## **Episode 2: Soft Eyes**

Episode 2 focused on Mr. Pryzbylewski's attempt to become acclimated to his role as a teacher. The episode also spoke to the academic condition the students endured at Tilghman Middle. In addition, the installment focused on Namond and the messages he received from his parents about what it meant to be a man.

**The school.** One scene in this episode depicted Mr. Pryzbylewski in a team meeting with fellow teachers Ms. Hanson, Ms. Shapiro, and Lead Teacher, Ms. Sampson.

**Ms. Sampson:** Next order of business: class rules...It helps if the team is constant on these...less wiggle room for the children...

**Ms. Sampson:** Same as last year...double spaced...Language Arts, we grade a lot of papers. It doesn't make 'em write any better, but it saves my eye sight.

**Ms. Shapiro:** Make sure you demonstrate it for them. Some of them think double spaced means more space between words.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I would have thought by 8th grade...

**Ms. Sampson:** Also, keep your windows closed...makes them drowsy, and drowsy is good. There is a lot to learn; but for now, build in lots of activities in your lesson plan. You can't have enough. You keep them busy; you keep them off guard.

(The teachers left, and Mr. Pryzbylewski looked overwhelmed and a bit confused.)

**Ms. Hanson:** You need soft eyes. (She leaves the room.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Excuse me?

Mr. Pryzbylewski did not understand what she meant and turned around in his chair in confusion. Having "soft eyes" was a term used to convey the need to see the big picture.

**The family.** During this episode, Namond and his mother, De'Londa, visited Wee-Bay, Namond's father, in prison. Wee-Bay used the time with his family to receive

updates on what was happening with Namond and his mother. The following passage is informative, because it indicates that even though Namond's father is in prison, Namond's family unit was solid. His parents worked together to ensure Namond was on the "right" path to continue his father's legacy as a drug dealer.

The following excerpt demonstrates Namond's close family unit and Wee-Bay's focus on Namond's life on the streets and ignoring his life as a student.

**Wee-Bay:** What's goin' on wit you though, son?

**Namond:** Ain't nuttin'. School 'bout to start.

**Wee-Bay:** Ummm...So what about Bodie and his boys? They treatin' you right?

**Namond:** Yeah, he cool.

**De'Londa:** Boy, don't lie to your fatha. He don't even show up for work half the damn time. Bodie told me.

**Namond:** Just a few days, that's all dad...

**De'Londa:** And what money you do make, you waste on nonsense. And if you think I'mma give you a dime for your school clothes, you better think again.

(Namond shakes his head in irritation.)

**Wee-Bay:** What Bodie got you doin'?

**Namond:** I been runnin' most days.

**Wee-Bay:** Er'body gotta start somewhere.

**De'Londa:** You better listen to your fatha.

**Wee-Bay:** He ain't tell you bout dat hair though, huh?

**Namond:** Yeah, he say I gotta get it cut (touching his head moving front to back). I like it this way.

**Wee-Bay:** Even though the White police are lookin' out from three blocks away, they're gonna be able to spot you from every other nigga out there. They gonna hop out and say look at the boy over there wit the pretty ass ponytail...get him. Think I'm bullshittin'. Either you real out there or you ain't, Nate. See what I'm sayin'?

### **Episode 3: Home Rooms**

In episode 3, Mr.Pryzbylewski began to understand the extent of the educational challenges of the students at Tilghman Middle, through his experience with his homeroom class.

**The school.** Mr. Pryzbylewski attempted to teach the students how to do word problems using traditional teaching methods. The students constantly interrupted him with questions that seemed to be unrelated to the word problem. Mr. Pryzbylewski did not seem to be aware of what was taking place in the classroom. What he may have missed is the students could have been using their cultural experiences to understand or make relevant the word problem he had asked them to solve. Through their questions, the students also were subtly telling Mr. Pryzbylewski about their daily concerns and issues. But Mr. Pryzbylewski became a bit frustrated and perceived the students' line of questioning as a way to have fun at his expense or simply a way to avoid doing class work. The following passage demonstrates this interaction.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Okay, I was saying my friend Andre is leaving Baltimore, he's going 60 miles per hour...

**Student 2:** (Interrupting) Ehay! What side of Baltimore? East or West?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** It doesn't make any difference.

**Student 3:** That's what you think.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Okay, East... (The students boo). West! West! (The students calm down again, now satisfied with Mr. Pryzbylewski's answer). Ok, uh...and he's going to Philadelphia.

**Student 3:** Man, Philly's ass.

**Student 4:** Yo, you think Alan Iverson is ass?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Okay, stop.

**Namond:** Yo, he only play for them; he ain't from there.

**Student 2:** I would never play for the Sixers, no matter how much they pay me.

**Namond:** Niggah, they pay yo ass to go away.

**Students:** (Laughter)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Enough!!! Okay, Andre is leaving Baltimore...West Baltimore traveling 60mph, he's going to Philadelphia, which is 80 miles away.

**Student 5:** What kind of car?

**Namond:** If he is on I-95 he need to watch out for the state police. They be profilin' niggahs. (Can't see Namond, but can decipher his voice).

**Randy:** He ain't say Andre was Black, yo. (Can't see Randy, but can decipher his voice).

**Namond:** Come on Randy, Andre from the West side?

**Randy:** Ehh, he ain't say he was Black.

**Namond:** You know he Black.

(Students begin to discuss Andre's ethnicity)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Okay! I said okay!!!

**Student 6:** Mr. Prezbo, you say he travelin' in a car? Is he driving, or is he like in the back seat?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Alright, you know what? Fun is fun.

**The family.** Episode 3 shows Michael as a surrogate father to his little brother, Bug. The episode portrayed Michael as caring and nurturing. He also promoted a love for school to his brother. This scene also shed further light on Dukie's family life, when Randy gave Dukie lunch, made by Miss Anna.

**Michael** (speaking to his little brother): Dag Bug, if you can tie one shoe, you can tie the other one (he ties his brother's shoe lace). You hear me? Cookies all on your face (he wipes the cookies off). Come on.

**Michael:** What's good? (Michael and Randy give each other dap)

**Randy:** What up shorty? You ready for the first day? (talking to Michael's brother)

**Michael:** Yeah, he can't wait to be in the 3rd grade, ain't that right Bug?

**Dukie:** (approaches the boys from behind) Wassup?  
(The boys slow down and look back)

**Randy:** Dukie...(Randy hands him the brown bag that appears have lunch enclosed)

**Dukie:** Cool...

#### **Episode 4: Refugees**

In episode 4, the administrators from Tilghman Middle and a group from the University of Maryland's Sociology Department, work together to design an implementation plan for a special project designed to help "corner kids." Also in episode 4, Michael demonstrates his maturity and role as surrogate father to his little brother.

**The school.** This episode introduced Dr. Parenti, a University of Maryland, Baltimore County professor from the Sociology Department, whose expertise lay in dealing with "youthful violent offenders." In the episode, Dr. Parenti worked with Mr. Colvin, a retired police officer turned facilitator/teacher, to get a non-academic pilot



program approved by the school board and the Edward Tilghman Middle School's administrators. The program received its funding from a \$200,000 grant, and sought to "try to find a way to get to some of the troubled kids who won't be in the school system too much longer." After talking to the school board and the school administrators, Mr. Colvin wanted the teachers' perspective on the initiative. He asked Ms. Sampson, the Lead Teacher, for her input and opinion on the matter.

**Mr. Colvin:** What's the line on us so far? From the teacher's lounge I mean?

**Ms. Sampson:** They're saying you're this year's bandaid. Is that how you feel?

**Mr. Colvin:** I was hoping for more than that.

**Ms. Sampson:** This year's splint...

**Mr. Colvin:** I mean, school system seems benign, and I get the sense North Avenue might give us some latitude, if not support.

**Ms. Sampson:** You think so?

**Mr. Colvin:** You sound doubtful.

**Ms. Sampson:** You can tell the days just by their faces. The best day is Wednesday. That is the farthest they get from home. Whatever's going on in the streets, you see smiles then. Monday is angry. Tuesday's they're caught between Monday and Wednesday, so it could go either way. Thursday, they're feelin' that weekend comin'. Friday, it's bad again.

**The family.** In episode 4, Michael further demonstrated his maturity and parenting skills. Despite his mother's unavailability, Michael found a way to remain positive for his brother and provide him with a healthy academic perspective by using supportive, reaffirming language. In the following excerpt, Michael and his brother returned home from school. Their mother had an unidentified man in the house, and both adults were under the influence of drugs. Michael and Bug entered the house, and their mother greeted them by asking what they learned in school. She did not ask because she was involved in their education, but inquired because she knew this was a question a "good parent" should ask.

**Mom:** Ya'll learn somethin' today? (talking to the boys as they come in the door. The boys don't answer and go straight to the kitchen)

**Mom:** Ya'll learn somethin' today?!!!

**Michael:** Yeah...

**Mom:** What ya'll learn?

(The boys say nothing. Michael prepares a snack for Bug, and Bug prepares to do his homework.)

**Michael:** That's your favorite right? Start wit' it.

**Bug:** I like Math.

**Michael:** Yeah, you good at it too.

## **Episode 5: Alliances**

Episode 5 spoke to a potential agreement between Edward Tilghman Middle School and the University of Maryland, to implement its pilot program for troubled students. The episode also addressed a potential alliance made between Michael and Marlo Stanfield, the reigning drug kingpin.

**The school.** Dr. Parenti, Mr. Colvin, and Tilghman administrators worked to figure out how to implement the University of Maryland Pilot Program at Edward Tilghman Middle within the confines of sound educational constructs. Mr. Colvin was not an educator by trade; so to him, the implementation and the identification of students was a very simple process. However, Dr. Parenti and the school administrators were cautious about how they should move forward. In the following excerpt, Dr. Parenti, Mr. Colvin, and Tilghman's Lead Teacher, Ms. Sampson discussed an implementation plan.

**Mr. Colvin:** It seems to me there are two kinds of kids walking in this building--stoop kids, corner kids.

**Dr. Parenti:** Excuse me?

**Mr. Colvin:** Stoop kids...them the ones that stay on the front steps when their parents tell 'em...The others go down to the corners.

**Ms. Sampson:** They can't sit still in a class. The others can and do.

**Mr. Colvin:** So separate the two...

**Dr. Parenti:** It's tracking.

**Mr. Colvin:** Excuse me?

**Dr. Parenti:** Tracking students. It's a nasty phrase in education circles. It refers to a grouping of children based on expected performance.

**Mr. Colvin:** Well, what's wrong with it?

**Ms. Sampson:** It says you have reduced expectations for certain students...that you expect less from them academically.

**Mr. Colvin:** So you pretend that you teaching all the kids, but the truth is you ain't teachin' any of them. But what if the stoop kids could be in classrooms where there was no disruptions?

**Dr. Parenti:** And the corner kids...?

**Mr. Colvin:** I mean, they are the ones you are after, right? I mean, that's why you got the grant money.

**Ms. Sampson:** As long as this doesn't involve warehousing children, I'm for anything that allows me to do my job. Every teacher here will tell you the same. The trick for you is to come up with a program that actually addresses itself to the corner kids.

**Dr. Parenti:** Oh no, we start pulling kids out of regular classes, won't they be stigmatized?

**Mr. Colvin:** It's not a stigma being booted out of class every other day?

**Dr. Parenti:** Question is, how do we identify the corner kids?

**Ms. Sampson:** That won't [be] a problem.

**Dr. Parenti:** Okay, okay.

**The family.** Marlo Stanfield, the reigning drug kingpin, began to track Michael after Michael rejected Marlo's \$200 gift to purchase school clothes or supplies in episode 2. Marlo was aware of Michael's family life and made an offer to Michael that seemingly would address all of his abandonment issues. Marlo sent his top two lieutenants, Chris and Snoop, to talk with Michael.

**Chris:** Hearing good things about you. Say you straight up, take care of your people, not beggin' no handouts.

**Snoop:** Muthafucka, you hear the niggah talkin to you, givin' you praises and shit, you standing here lookin' fuckin' stupid.

**Chris:** Yo, chill. Sometime she get a little hot.

**Snoop:** I'm just sayin, the boy ain't right.

**Chris:** Yo, we always in the market for a good soldier. We see one we like, we take care of the situation. Take him in, school him, make him family...And if you're with us, you're with us. Just like we be with you all the way. You have a mind, you're in.

**Michael:** Look man, I already got a family--my moms and my little brother.

**Chris:** Yeah, heard that. But think on it (handing Michael what appears to be a large sum of cash). We be around you need something.

## **Episode 6: Margin of Error**

In episode 6, the school district and university leaders approve the University of Maryland Pilot Program. The teachers at Tilghman are happy about this addition. Namond and his mother are on their way to a meeting with Avon Barksdale's sister. Prior to their arrival at the Barksdale's, Namond and his mother discuss Namond's birthright.

**The school.** The school board and the Tilghman administrators approved the University of Maryland Pilot Program. The initiative began immediately, and the teachers were relieved that the program would remove some of their most challenging students from their classrooms. The excerpt below reinforces the teachers' feelings about the "corner kids." The show characterized "corner kids" as children that were abandoned by their families and raised by the streets. More importantly, "corner kids" represented students with an out of control, disruptive, aggressive attitude, and an inability to be a part of a traditional classroom setting.

**Ms. Sampson:** I have what I think is some very good news for all of you. We're going to be implementing the University of Maryland Pilot Program.

**Teacher1:** You're only taking three of my knuckleheads?

**Ms. Sampson:** A total of 10 children from the 8th grade in this first class; 8 boys and 2 girls if things go well.

**Teacher 1:** It's a start.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** When?

**Ms. Sampson:** This morning.

**Teacher 2:** Halleluah!

**Teacher 3:** Not a moment too soon.

(The teachers laugh)

**The family.** In this episode, Avon Barksdale's sister invited Namond and his mother to her home for a meeting. Avon Barksdale led the Barksdale Organization, which was the drug regime before Marlo Stanfield took over the drug trade in the city.

While Avon was in jail, his sister made sure that De'Londa and Namond were financially secure, given that Wee-Bay made a major sacrifice in accepting guilt for crimes he did not commit to cover for the Barksdale Organization. De'Londa and Namond were not aware that their cash flow was about to end abruptly. Prior to their arrival, De'Londa gives Namond a preparatory talk that reinforces his belief about who he is as Wee-Bay's son.

**De'Londa:** I want you to remember, you representin yo daddy.

**Namond:** Yeah, I know. What she wanna see us for anyway?

**De'Londa:** Maybe she got somethin' special in mind for you boy.

**Namond:** Hmm, cool.

**De'Londa:** She's a Barksdale. She knows talent when she sees it. 'Sides they owe this family alot. Your daddy, he stood tall for them.

**Namond:** I know, I know. He a soldier.

**De'Londa:** Like father; like son

**Namond:** No doubt

### **Episode 7: Unto Others**

Episode 7 focused on how the educational trajectories of the boys became distinct through the University of Maryland Pilot Program. It also focused on the change in Mr. Pryzbylewski's teaching style. The pilot program separated Namond and his friends, and placed them on very different educational paths. Based on their history of disruptive and aggressive behavior and their attitudes in the classroom, the school identified Namond and three of his classmates as "corner kids." They moved from their regular class and joined the University of Maryland Pilot Program. Meanwhile, Dukie, Michael, and Randy became more engaged in class, due to a new computer in the classroom and Mr. Pryzbylewski's use of dice to teach probabilities.

**The school.** Namond and the other students are in the special pilot program, they experienced challenges because they thought the rules that applied in their regular class

were the same rules that applied in their new class. This change came as a surprise and a major frustration to Namond when he tried to receive a suspension from school in order to work on the corner. In the following excerpt, Namond causes a disruption in class by teasing one of his female classmates, but his plan fails.

This section extends its focus on the school, because this episode provided no examples of relevant family situations.

**Namond:** Hey, sweet thang...

**Teacher:** Shondra, we're working on our short essay. If you will...

**Namond:** Diamonds are a girl's best friend (Namond is laying on his desk not doing any work). You need to get down or lay down.

**Teacher:** Namond if you don't stop, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave class.

**Namond:** (He gets up from his seat) See you sad ass muthafuckas in about three days.

**Teacher:** You're leaving class not school.

(Namond and the other students are stunned that he is not being suspended. Namond decides to throw a chair against the wall)

**Namond:** What about now bitch, huh? Huh? (A security guard comes in, and Namond holds out his arms to be handcuffed)

**Teacher 2:** That's not necessary, Namond.

**Namond:** Oh, you gotta suspend me?

**Teacher 2:** We're gonna have a little talk.

**Namond:** (confused) Man, fuck y'all. I know the rules. You gotta suspend me. School gotta have rules. (He walks out with the security guard in frustration)

Meanwhile, in Mr. Pryzbylewski's class, the students are “shooting dice<sup>3</sup> to help them learn probabilities.” Mr. Pryzbylewski stumbled upon the idea to teach the students in this way when Michael and a fellow student were in his class playing cards during lunch. Mr. Pryzbylewski approached the boys to end the game when he noticed the students were doing some light gambling. Rather than get angry, Mr. Pryzbylewski

---

<sup>3</sup> “Shooting dice” or “street craps” is a game in which the players make wagers on the outcome of the roll, or a series of rolls, of a pair of dice. In the African American community, individuals typically play the game on the floor or on a sidewalk. On the street, this game involves a significant amount of masculine banter and bravado.

pleasantly asked them to stop; but he also gave Michael a pointer on how he could have won the game. The conversation turned into one about odds and probabilities. Michael asked Mr. Pryzbylewski if someone could learn about odds using dice. In that moment, Mr. Pryzbylewski found a new path for reaching and teaching his students. After finding dice in old board games located in the school supply closet, he allowed the students to “shoot dice,” (without gambling) as they would on the street (i.e. desks pushed back with students circled around on the floor), but he kept the focus of the activity on the probability lesson.

**Michael:** Your point's full (Randy shot his dice).

**Randy:** I'm hot; I'mma get it.

**Michael:** Al'ight, I'll cover that.

**Student:** Bettin' wit' my boy, Randy.

**Michael:** You about to get your money taken.

(Randy kisses the dice and rolls. Randy and students who bet with him lost.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Randy what are you doing? Didn't we go over this? How many ways can you make a four?

**Student:** Not enough for his Black ass.

**Randy:** Look whose talkin' (laughter)

**Michael:** Yo, he just come today, so he missed the whole thing about the odds.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Right. There's only three ways to make a four, but to make a seven...

**Michael:** Six

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** That's good. So what should have been your play?

**Randy:** Shoulda bet against the roll.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Good to have you back, Mr. Wagstaff (nodding his head approvingly.)

(Lead Teacher, Ms. Sampson, walks in and motions to Mr. Pryzbylewski, as if to ask, “What is going on?” She looks a bit uncertain about whether or not she approves of the activity.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Trick 'em into thinking they aren't learning, and they do. While looking for the dice in the school supply room, Mr. Pryzbylewski also found a new computer. He brought the computer into the classroom for the students to use for special projects. While the other students were learning probabilities, Dukie spent his class period on the computer.

While working with the other students on probabilities, Mr. Prez looks over at Dukie at the computer. Dukie is excitedly smiling. Up until this episode, Dukie has not smiled or demonstrated any expression of happiness.

### **Episode 8: Corners Boys**

Episode 8 further demonstrated the growing disparity between the educational trajectories of Namond and the other boys. In Namond's new class, he proudly defined himself and shared his views on life. Namond was excited about the things he was able to share in his class; just as Dukie, Michael, and Randy had become very motivated about the computer and learning about probabilities in their class.

This episode also showed another dimension of Namond. He began to emerge as a real leader, as he demonstrated his understanding of the world around him, beyond the street, by discussing the double standards of society. In addition, episode 8 portrayed Mr. Pryzbylewski and his attempts to understand and navigate a broken school system. The following excerpts focus on three components of school.

**The school.** In Namond's new class, the students discussed their current identities, their visions of the future, and the qualities that made a good "corner boy", but the underlying focus of the class was expectations. Namond and his classmates were still adjusting to the rules of their class. They expected to receive a certain punishment when they disrupted class (e.g., suspension or expulsion), and they wanted to revert to the familiar expectations and rules of their old classroom. Namond's new teachers were trying to help the students establish a new order and a new mindset, in an effort to find common ground between the students' school identity/conduct and their street identity/conduct.



In the following passage, the teacher, using a bit of reverse psychology, made a comment about the students having “beat the system” by being in this new class. The teacher was trying to convey the message that the other students in the school perceived that the students in the pilot program had “beaten the system,” because they no longer participated in the traditional classroom. Namond responded positively to this news by giving his classmate “dap.”<sup>4</sup> Namond felt that being in the alternative class was something he could feel proud about.

When the conversation turned to future aspirations, the teacher asked the students about how they saw themselves, where they thought they would be within the next 2-3 years, and what they wanted to be when they became adults. The majority of the students indicated that they wanted to become NBA players or drug dealers. Interestingly, one student said he wanted to be a neurosurgeon, which suggested that some of the students had hope for a future, and that some had dreams and aspirations that did not involve the streets. Namond said he wanted to be a “playa” (player), which referred to becoming a drug dealer. His word choice is interesting, because the term, “playa” brings about a certain connotation. To be a “playa,” means to “run game” or to be very tricky, savvy; in an attempt to “get over” on people in any situation. In the following excerpt, Namond demonstrated his “playa” attitude in class, which brought forth a frustrated response from Mr. Colvin.

**Teacher:** No tantrums today?

**Student:** What's the point? You're not even gonna suspend us right?

**Teacher:** Right. What's the point? So we're here, like it or not. If it makes you all feel any better, the word around school is you're down here because you beat the system. You had no interest in being in a classroom, and you made the classroom impossible for everybody else, and now you're out. You won.

---

<sup>4</sup> Dap is a type of handshake, similar to a high five, that denotes happiness. Individuals also may excperform the gesture as a friendly greeting.

(Namond laughs and gives his classmate dap)

**Teacher:** You feel like winners?

**Namond:** Always...

**Student1:** Yeah, that's how we do.

**Teacher:** Who's we?

**Student2:** Us...

**Teacher:** No, who are you?

**Namond:** Playas...

**Teacher:** Kingpins?

**Namond:** Nawh, that comes later. Right now, we just corner boys.

**Teacher:** So, how long until you're kingpins?

**Student2:** I'm thinkin' 2, 3 years.

**Teacher:** Two, three years...Let me ask, and I want everybody to write this down...Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

(The room is silent)

**Teacher:** Come on...pencil and paper...This isn't school work; this is about y'all. Alright, show of hands, how many wrote NBA? (two hands raise).

**Student 1:** I have it only for the Lakers though.

**Student 2:** I wanna be a pediatric neurosurgeon, like that one niggah...what's his name?

**Dr. Parenti:** Ben Carson?

**Student 2:** Yeah, that dude.

**Teacher:** If you wanna be a surgeon, you need to go to medical school.

**Student 2:** Whatever...

**Teacher:** How many wrote down dead?

(Most of the students raised their hands.)

**Namond:** Shit! You saw that comin', huh?

(Students chuckle)

**Teacher:** Shame ya'll have so little time, and you're waisting it in here with us. You know where you're goin', and we can't teach you anything you don't know about that, right? Right?

**Namond:** (Flipping the pages of a magazine at his desk) That's what we been sayin'.

In the middle of this productive and insightful conversation, Namond decided to disrupt the class and demonstrate his “playa” skills (an attempt to “get over”); Mr. Colvin responds.

**Teacher:** Namond, put away the magazine.

**Namond:** I ain't readin' no magazine.

**Teacher:** Namond!!

**Namond:** What? It ain't even mine. It was layin' here when I came in.

**Mr. Colvin:** (chuckling) Ya'll little pisses. You know ya'll givin' up a fine education..."It ain't even mine. It was just laying here when I came in" (mocking Namond). You know this right here is the whole damn school, and the way they carry themselves is training for the street. Build us this system; we the cops.

**Student:** Yeah, you are for sure.

**Mr. Colvin:** Ya'll come in here everyday and practice gettin' over. Try runnin' all different kind of games. It's practice for the corner, right? Ain't no real cops, ain't no real danger; but ya'll are gettin' somethin' out of this, bet you didn't even know that.

**Namond:** Still rather be out there.

**The school.** After school, Namond, Michael, and Randy walked home from school and discussed what they learned in their classes.

**Namond:** Dag, fractions?

**Michael:** We still on fractions.

**Namond:** You wanna know what we talked about in my new class today?

**Michael:** What?

**Namond:** Slingin' (selling drugs)... Yo, I'm not playin. We talked about bidness (business), about puttin' shit on the damn street.

**Michael:** Niggah, please...

**Namond:** It was like we was schoolin 'em. Yo, my new class is the shit.

In another scene focused on Namond's class, after the discussion about the student's future aspirations, Namond became vocal about his understanding of the societal systems at play. He called institutions and the people who run or work within those institutions, hypocrites. This scene is significant because it suggests that Namond is more than just a "corner boy" and has insight about the world beyond the street.

**Namond:** Yeah, like y'all say, "Don't lie, don't bump, don't cheat, don't steal," or whatever; but what about y'all, huh? What the government..what's it? Amron, steroids, yeah...liquor business...Booze the real killer out there...and cigarettes...Oh, shit! Hey, you got some smokes in there? (looking at the teacher)

**Teacher:** I'm tryin' to quit.

**Student 1:** Drugs paid your salary, right? (looking at Mr. Colvin)

**Mr. Colvin:** Nawh, not exactly, but I get your point.

**Namond:** We do the same thing as ya'll, 'cept when we do it, it's like, "Oh my God, these kids is animals." Like it's the end of the world comin'. Man, that's bullshit. Al'ight. Cuz this is like, what's it...hypocrite?, hypocritical?

**Student 2:** I mean yeah we got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing.

**The school.** The next pertinent scene related to school, focuses on the challenges of the teachers at Edward Tilghman Middle School. The teachers struggle to teach effectively and to simultaneously meet No Child Left Behind standards. The following scene demonstrates Mr. Pryzbylewski's frustration and lack of understanding about the system, while the more seasoned teachers share their own perspectives and advice on how to navigate the system.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I give a test on fractions; half the kids have breakdowns. I still have a lot of kids who can barely handle whole numbers.

**Lead Teacher:** Well, if it's any comfort, I have, outside of my advanced class, maybe half a dozen reading at grade level.

**Teacher1:** Try having them on the periodic table of elements.

**Teacher 2:** The thing is; it's your curriculum and you have to stick to it.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I can't; it's absurd.

**Teacher 2 (Black):** You have to. That test in April is the difference between the state taking over the school or not.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Maybe the state should.

**Teacher 1 (White):** You don't teach math; you teach the test. North Ave is all about the Leave No Child Behind stuff getting spoon fed.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** And what are they learning?

(Teacher 1 says nothing and walks away)

**Lead Teacher:** Find some middle ground. Everyday, try to do a little for the statewide, and keep a unit problem on the blackboard for Donnelly. You know, she comes to visit, she thinks you're on point. The rest of the time do what you feel like you need to do.

**Teacher 2:** But be careful, you're still on the far side of your evaluation.

**Teacher 3:** The first year isn't about the kids; it's about you surviving.

**The family.** The following scene speaks to Michael's maturity, his role as the head of his household, surrogate father to his younger brother, and his struggle to survive living with his drug-addicted mother. In this scene, Michael attempted to prepare dinner

for his brother Bug, when he realized food was missing from their pantry. Michael inquired about the food through a heated discussion with his mother.

**Michael:** Where's the Rice-a Roni? Ma, where's the Rice-a-Roni?

**Mom:** There was some boy on the stoop; look like he was starvin'.

**Michael:** So you cooked it for him?

**Mom:** Nawh, I just gave it to him

**Michael:** You just gave it to him? Boy ate a raw box of Rice-a-Roni. How much did you sell the groceries for?

**Mom:** Don't look at me like that. I gotta go out.

(Michael's mother begins to leave the house, seemingly, to buy drugs. His mother looks at him with an expectation to receive money. Michael turns his back, pulls out money, and gives his mother \$10)

**Mom:** 10?!!!

**Michael:** You have your Rice-a-Roni profit.

**Mom:** Michael, come on!!!

(Michael is silent and doesn't give her more money)

**Mom:** Boy, I ain't gonna let you hold the DSS card if you ain't gonna do right by me.

**Michael:** You gonna let me hold that card.

**Mom:** You a hard child.

(Michael's mother walks out of the house without closing the door. Michael walks to the door and yells.)

**Michael:** Next time don't go sellin' the food out of our mouths!!!

## **Episode 9: Know Your Place**

In episode 9, the boys' lives began to come to a climax. Their school lives, street lives, and family lives intersected (the headings in the remainder of the chapter reflect the intersection), which forced the boys to make critical decisions that seemingly would determine their fates. Despite Namond's heir status (son of Wee-Bay) and his constant proclamations about being a gangster, his world began to crumble when he received his own drug corner [and the other corner boys began to question his true character]. The revelation came to the other corner boys, who would serve as Namond's lieutenants; to

Sergeant Carver, a police officer who issued Namond a warning for selling drugs, but did not book him because he was too young; and to Cutty, an ex-convict and the long time friend of Namond's father, who opened a boxing gym to help the boys in the community.

This episode revealed a second dynamic regarding Namond, related to his economic class status. Through his parents, Namond had come to believe that he was royalty in his neighborhood; but when Mr. Colvin took him out of his neighborhood to a downtown establishment, Namond began to question his status and identity.

In episode 5, Randy revealed to Mr. Pryzbylewski that he wanted to be an entrepreneur, a storeowner. Randy was a natural businessman. He sold candy to his classmates, mainly during the school lunch hours, to make extra money. In this episode, Randy uses his business-savvy, his new knowledge of probabilities, and Dukie's understanding of computers, to save money on purchasing candy for his business.

Finally, this episode further exemplifies Michael's family challenges, when his mother again exchanged their food for drugs, and when his status as head of household and surrogate father were challenged by the return of his brother's father, who had been away serving time in prison. The return of Bug's father also threatened Michael's sense of security; because the man sexually molested Michael (this occurred prior to season 4).

**The school and the family meet the street (Namond).** Namond's mother forced Bodie to give Namond his own "package," and in this episode, Bodie, Namond, and two neighborhood boys--Kennard and Donut, met on Namond's newly-assigned corner. Bodie's friend and Kennard (Namond's Lieutenant) questioned Namond's strength. Namond felt he had to prove himself on the street as a true gangster, when Kennard (approximately 8-10 years old) challenged his authority.

**Bodie:** Yeah, man...Al'ight. So, what I'm sayin' is, that you got from Bentlow down there to Rosewood right here. Al'ight? Now, I got the block from Monroe all the way down to Payson, so I got you covered from that side, but you gotta put lookouts at Frankentown to catch anybody comin' from the other way.

**Namond:** Al'ight, I got you.

**Bodie:** Are you ready to work?

**Namond:** Yeah, just give my re-up and go on about this shit for real.

**Bodie:** No. Are you ready to work?!!

**Namond:** Yeah, ready to work.

**Bodie:** Eh yo, look Man, please do not be havin' yo mamma come talk for you.

**Namond:** Man I ain't have her do nothin'; she just get on the horse and come wit' it.

**Bodie:** Hey look, I done did everything I can for you and yours but from here on, your moms can't do nothin' to help. Al'ight? (Bodie and his friend walk away)

**Bodie's friend:** Him...from Wee-Bay?

**Kennard:** (Speaks to Namond in a perplexed manner) Yo moms? (Namond isn't pleased by the comment.)

Later in the episode Namond entered the boxing gym, where the neighborhood boys came to learn how to box, looking for Michael. Sergeant Carver was in the gym talking with Coach Cutty. Sergeant Carver extended a second warning to Namond about being on the corner selling drugs. Coach Cutty had a conversation with Sergeant Carver about how Namond doesn't have what it takes to live a criminal life-style like his father Wee-Bay.

**Namond:** Yo coach, you seen Michael?

**Coach Cutty:** Nawh.

**Namond:** Al'ight.

(Sgt. Carver enters the gym)

**Sgt. Carver:** That wasn't you and your runts down on Bentlow I saw yesterday slingin', Cuz a gangsta like yourself wouldn't set up such a weak ass shop. No real lookouts, ground stash in plain view. This is me tellin' y'all as plain as I can, you guys had your one chance. I see you out there a second time, everyone takes a beating and goes to Chelton. Fair warning you just got.

**Namond:** Cheltonham for some drug charges? Please, man.

**Sgt. Carver:** I write you up as a special. Don't think I won't do it.

**Kennard:** He don't think I can jail. Shit!!!

**Coach Cutty:** Slangin, huh? (referring to Namond)

**Sgt. Carver:** Yeah. He's one of yours right?

**Coach Cutty:** He hang around the gym mostly waiting on his boy Michael. He don't box or nothin'. He ain't that kind really. Not like his father.

**Sgt. Carver:** Yeah? Who's his father?

**Coach Cutty:** Dude named Wee-Bay. Stonehead who used to run wit' them Barksdales.

**Sgt. Carver:** I know him. Shit, I locked him up in Philadelphia.

**Coach Cutty:** Yeah? Bay was my cut buddy. We jailed down in Jessup. Anyway, Namond is from him. Same blood, but not the same heart.

**The school meets the street (Namond).** In the following scene, Namond and his classmates, Zenobia and Darnell were the winners of a class project. As a reward, Mr. Colvin took the students to Ruth's Chris Steakhouse in downtown Baltimore. The students were nervous, awkward, and felt out of place because they rarely ventured outside of their neighborhood and they had never been to an upscale restaurant. When they arrived, the hostess asked for their coats. Darnell and Namond kept their coats and appeared uncomfortable with the request. When the hostess led them to their table, she pulled out a chair for Darnell; he thought the chair was for the hostess. Darnell also did not know the difference between the hostess and the wait staff. Zenobia seemed to have had exposure to this type of environment.

**Hostess:** The waitress will be here soon to detail the specials for the day.

**Darnell:** Waitress? Who was that?

**Mr. Colvin:** That's the hostess.

**Namond:** Hey, you ain't gotta worry, Mr. C. I ain't gonna run up your bill. I'll just get whatever is on special.

**Zenobia:** It ain't no K-mart, blue light special dumbass. "Special" just mean they cook something different.

**Namond:** Yo what about you? Drinkin without a straw...all ghetto and shit.

**Zenobia:** You don't drink water with a straw. And put that on your lap fool (Darnell has his napkin tucked into his shirt). You see anybody else up in here lookin all Fred Flintstone and shit?(Namond laughs loudly)

**Darnell:** Yo, shut it down. Other people be lookin at us.

(The waitress comes to the table to tell them about the specials of the day. The options are confusing to the students)

**Namond:** Dag, I thought ya'll had steak.

**Waitress:** Oh we do. On the second page of your menus.



Namond and the other students were annoyed and challenged by the experience. Given Namond had more access to this type of environment because his family had more financial resources, he should have had more experience and access to this type of setting than his classmates, but he was equally as uncomfortable in the situation. The experience at the restaurant was a reality check for the students and Mr. Colvin. The experience also confirmed the students' class status.

After the dinner, the students were disappointed and uncomfortable with their reality. They left the restaurant to return to their neighborhood.

**Darnell:** Yo, Mr. C, can we stop at Mc Donalds?

**Zenobia:** Fuck wrong wit' you boy?

**Darnell:** Food wasn't right. Don't like fish.

**Zenobia:** Why did you order it then?

**Darnell:** Shut the fuck up.

When they left the restaurant, Namond decided to communicate his disappointment and frustration by reverting to his usual, disruptive self; in an attempt to hide behind his wall of protection. He increased the volume on the radio. When Mr. Colvin asked him to reduce the volume, Namond responded by making it louder. Each student had their own way of handling their challenges with the evening.

(Namond turns on the music loudly)

**Colvin:** Turn that down Namond.

**Namond:** What?

**Colvin:** Turn it down Namond!!!

**Namond:** Turn it up?? Al'ight you got it.

**Darnell:** Seriously, can I get some fries at least?

**Zenobia:** Boy, you is pathetic!!!

**Darnell:** Just cuz you a girl, don't mean I won't fuck you all up. You hear me?

**Zenobia:** Niggah, please

**Darnell:** Yeah, you keep talkin all that shit.

**Zenobia:** No, you keep talkin all that shit.

**Darnell:** You musta forgot.

**Zenobia:** No, I aint forget shit. What I forget anyway?

**Darnell:** That I'm a man.

At school the next day, Dr. Parenti and Mr. Colvin discussed the dinner and the way the students were so out of touch with their feelings. This scene speaks to the complexity of the students' lives.

**Dr. Parenti:** So they didn't know their salad fork from whatever the fuck the other fork is for, so what?

**Mr. Colvin:** I knew they'd be at a loss, but the extent of it...I'm talkin' about feelings. Why they feeling this plummet from master of the universe to abject fiery to humiliated fiery and no awareness of it.

**Dr. Parenti:** Who says they're not aware. Maybe they just didn't acknowledge.

**Mr. Colvin:** Wait, but my point is where do you start with them? How you get them to believe in themselves if they can't even admit their feelings about who they are and what they doin' in this world? They not fools. They know exactly what we expect them to be.

**The school meets the street (Randy and Dukie).** In this scene, Randy uses his charm, busy-savvy, and his new knowledge of probabilities, taught by Mr. Pryzbylewski, to expand his candy business. Through Dukie, Randy learned that he could purchase candy for his business cheaper online than he could purchase it from "the Koreans." However, Randy realized that he needed a credit card to make the purchase. Randy asked Mr. Pryzbylewski if he would make the purchase with his credit card, and Randy promised to pay Mr. Pryzbylewski back in cash. Mr. Pryzbylewski agreed on the condition that Randy didn't gamble or do anything illegal to obtain the money. Later, Dukie and Randy walked home from school discussing their request to Mr. Pryzbylewski. On their way, the boys saw a group of men "shooting dice" in the alley. Randy walked over to enter the game, but initially, the men prevented him from participating because they thought he and Dukie were too young and without money. Once Randy showed his cash, they allowed him to enter the game.

Randy placed bets for several hours and won every game. Once he had enough money, he left with Dukie; but the man who allowed them to enter the game left with them.

**Randy:** Yo, thanks for walkin' us off. I thought we was gone get banked.

**Dukie:** You ain't gone bank us is you?

**Man:** Shit boy, you think I'm that ungrateful? I followed you through 10 shooters and made more money than I have in a month. Nawh, I ain't gone rob you. I just need to know next time you fade a dice game. You feel me?

**Randy:** I mean, it's all about the math, you know, the probabilities and all.

**Man:** I ain't never seent you in the game befo. Where you learn yo game?

**Randy:** Edward Tillman Middle

**Man:** Shiitt. (The man is shocked)

The next day, Randy entered Mr. Pryzbylewski's class with the money he had won.

**Randy:** Mr. P...

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Randy... (Randy hands him the money he won from betting on the dice game). Randy...how did you get...?

**Randy:** Six beat four or five and most times eight is better than 10, right? You schooled me good!

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You gambled for this?

**Randy:** I ain't even pick up the dice. I was all pass, no pass, got to the point where some of them was followin' me in there.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You shouldn't gamble.

**Randy:** I know, but I'm just sayin'. Math be right, Mr. P. But I'mma come back at lunch and we can computer up that candy. Al'ight? Peace.

**The school.** In the following scene, all of the teachers at Tilghman Middle, including Mr. Pryzbylewski and the Lead Teacher, Ms. Sampson, sat in a meeting with Principal Withers and Assistant Principal Donnelly to discuss their approach to the upcoming Maryland State Assessments (MSA). This scene sheds further light on the creative efforts of Tilghman Middle's teachers and administrators to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Last year, we had MSAs in the 22<sup>nd</sup> percentile, and don't think they haven't noticed it up at the Puzzle Palace. The word is they're looking for at least a 10 point increase from all city middle schools this time around.

**Teachers:** We're still 6 weeks away from the MSAs. You want us to start teaching the test now?

**Principal Withers:** This year, the preferred term is "curriculum alignment."  
(Teacher's laugh)

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** There's nothing wrong with emphasizing the skills necessary for the MSA. If we can get them to write a paragraph without a four letter word in it, it'll have to have better command of English.

**Teacher:** Marsha, skill sets are one thing, but this has us teaching test questions directly.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Test questions that involve skills. I don't see your point. (Her tone and expression suggest she knows what the teacher is talking about, but is ignoring it like there is nothing wrong with this practice). Were you really expecting something different than last year?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I don't see the math section. These are all language arts questions.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Our grade is "failing" on standardized tests last year. So, for the time being, all teachers will devote class time to teaching language arts sample questions. (Teachers are bothered by this notion). Now, if you turn to page 11, please, I have some things I wanna go over with you.

(Mr. Pryzbylewski is sitting beside the Lead Teacher, and he begins to talk to her)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I don't get it. All this so we score higher on the state test? If we're teaching the kids the test questions, what are we assessing in that?

**Leader Teacher:** Nothing. It assesses us. The test scores go up; they can say the schools are improving. The scores stay down; they can't.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Juking the stats.

**Leader Teacher:** Excuse me?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Making robberies into larcenies, making rapes disappear. You juke the stats and majors become colonels. I've been here before.

**Lead Teacher:** Where ever you go; there you are.

**The family.** This scene showed Michael and his brother, Bug, at home building a volcano for Bug's school project. Bug's father walked in and observed the boys. He and Michael then had a verbal altercation regarding his return to the household.

**Michael:** What are you still doin' here? Ain't nobody want you here.

**Bug's Father:** Yo momma want me.

**Michael:** Yeah, you and the pipe.

**Bug's Father:** You shouldn't talk about yo momma like that, Michael.

**Bug:** Hey daddy, see my volcano?

**Michael:** Bug, go upstairs.

**Bug's Father:** Bug need me too. Saturday, right? Bug need me.

**Bug:** My teacher say I need glasses. I gotta have an adult with me. Pick'em up, sign for'em.

**Michael:** Bug, go upstairs to your room.

**Bug's Father:** Ice cold, boy. Where you be? Ain't you got forgiveness to your soul?

**Michael:** Man, fuck you!!!

**Bug's Father:** Watch your mouth. You're big, but not big enough. Now, where is that DSS card? Yo mamma say that come to me.

**Michael:** Ain't nothin' left on this month's check anyway.

**Dad:** Before the first of the month then. (He tries to touch Michael's head but Michael pulls away.)

The next day, Michael talked to Dukie and Randy about possibly calling social services to have Bug's father removed from the household. To Michael, his options looked bleak, because of his lack of trust of men (due to his sexual molestation), and distrust of the school administrators.

**Michael:** Yo Dukie, you ever call social services on your muvah?

**Randy:** What?

**Michael:** I don't know, I just wanna know what happens if you call social services on somebody.

**Dukie:** You wanna report your motha?

**Michael:** She brung someone home; he won't leave.

**Randy:** You don't wanna call social services. They gets to lookin' into things; they could put you in a group home...split you and Bug up even.

**Michael:** But I don't want us to leave. I just want him to leave.

**Randy:** Talkin' bout Bug's daddy ain't you?

**Dukie:** Maybe you oughta talk to a teacher about this. I mean Mr. Prezbo is real good about stuff.

**Michael:** Mr. P did say I could go talk to the school social worker.

**Randy:** Mr. Rotten Neck. He an alcoholic.

**Dukie:** Oh..um...What about that boxing guy? Mr. Cutty.  
(Michael frowns)

**Randy:** What's wrong wit' Cutty?

**Michael:** I don't know. Like he just too friendly, you know? That shit creep me out, man. Like he some type of faggot or something.

**Randy:** Nawh, not Cutty man. He be all up in the women. Yo don't you see how he be doin'?

**Michael:** That don't mean shit, them faggots be just like that too. And I don't know, he just too friendly, you know. Everybody just too mutha fuckin friendly!!!  
(Michael storms off.)

## **Episode 10: Misgiving**

In episode 10, the boys faced their greatest challenges. Randy was labeled a snitch, because of the confirmation he provided to Ms. Donnelly of his classmates', Paul and Monell's, involvement in an alleged rape and his admission to knowing about a murder. This episode also fully revealed Namond's lack of bravery. In one scene, Sergeant Carver again caught Namond "slingin" (selling drugs). This time, Sergeant Carver took Namond to the police station and threatened to book him. Because Namond was underage, he would have to go to what Sergeant Carver called, "baby booking," unless Namond could reach a parent or guardian. Namond could not contact his mother, because she had gone on a trip to Atlantic City. Surprisingly, Namond was terrified of going to "baby booking." Sergeant Carver allowed Namond to spend the night at the police station, but Namond would be booked if he could not contact an adult. The next day, with his mother still absent and unreachable, Namond called Mr. Colvin. Mr. Colvin allowed Namond to stay at his house overnight. Namond's time with Mr. Colvin and his wife, gave him an opportunity to build a bond with Mr. Colvin that would transform Namond's life.

This episode further revealed that Michael felt threatened and unsafe in his home with the return of Bug's father. With this looming threat, he asked Marlo Stanfield for help. In turn, Chris and Snoop, Marlow's two top lieutenants, murdered Bug's father. Michael's request for help placed him on a life-changing path.

This episode also placed a particular focus on the school system. Dr. Parenti and Mr. Colvin met with the Area Superintendant to discuss the pilot program, and the two men felt both challenged and disturbed by the conversation.

**The school meets the street (Randy).** In this scene, Randy, Michael, and Dukie were at school. As they left class, one male student walked in between Randy and Michael and bumped Randy in the process.

**Student:** Snitch Bitch...

**Michael:** Hey yo, what the fuck was that?

**Randy:** I don't know.

**The family meets the street (Namond).** After catching him selling drugs on the corner again, Sergeant Carver took Namond to the police station. Sergeant Carver threatened to send Namond to “baby booking,” but he saw that Namond was afraid, and encouraged him to call an adult.

**Sgt. Carver:** Try calling again.

**Namond:** Man I know she not gone answer. My moms don't answer when she go to AC.

**Sgt. Carver:** When is she comin' back?

**Namond:** She goin' to New York after.

**Sgt. Carver:** What's she doin' in New York?

**Namond:** Shoppin...going to see some show; The Color Purple.

**Sgt. Carver:** See. Now, this is where my job gets good. You can reach a guardian; we both know the juvenile master is gonna recog you on a first time drug arrest. But now you better have a toothbrush on you son, cuz it's gonna be baby booking tonight.

(Namond looks frightened)

**Sgt. Carver:** Namond, you scared? I mean, if it was Cheltonham, I don't blame you; but baby booking's just across town.

**Namond:** The east side be beefin' wit' the west side in there; and some dudes be gettin raped and shit. I mean that's what I be hearin'.

**Sgt. Carver:** It's bad in there; I don't know if it's that bad.

**Namond:** Well, I hear different.

**Sgt. Carver:** You got no other family?

**Namond:** I got a aunt down in PG county.

**Sgt. Carver:** You got a number?

**Namond:** (Shakes his head no)

**Sgt. Carver:** Well, I ain't drivin' you this late anyway so...

**Namond:** Come on, man...

**Sgt. Carver:** Tell you what, two of my guys are working a double, working midnight shift tonight. If you can plant yourself on that bench over there, you can stay here for the night. But first thing tomorrow you gotta raise that aunt or raise your moms, or I gotta proces you. You don't move off that bench. You need the

bathroom; you go now. Otherwise just sit tight. Don't give anybody any trouble, or they'll process you right then and there.

The next day Namond is able to reach the only adult he knows, his teacher Mr. Colvin.

Mr. Colvin agrees to pick up Namond and Namond spends the night at Mr. Colvin's

house. The following day, Mr. Colvin takes Namond home.

**Namond:** Hey ma, how was New York?

**Mr. Colvin:** Hey, Ms. Brice. How you?

**De'Londa:** Who askin'?

**Namond:** This is my teacher ma, Mr. Colvin.

**De'Londa:** Why he here? You in trouble?

**Mr. Colvin:** He stayed at our house last night. I mean with you being in New York and all. Tell her.

**Namond:** Cops picked me up, sayin' I was slingin'. They was gonna send me to baby booking.

**Mr. Colvin:** But we took him in

**De'Londa:** You, leave my son the fuck alone. And you, you afraid to go to baby booking? What the fuck is wrong wit' you? Boy, get in the damn house.

**The family meets the street (Michael).** As mentioned above, Michael enlisted Marlow's crew to eliminate Bug's father. In this scene, Michael identified Bug's father for Chris and Snoop (members of Marlow's crew), as the man exited a local store.

Michael told the crew members that he wanted Bug's father gone.

**Snoop:** He a fig?

**Michael:** Nawh, probably coppin' for my moms.

**Snoop:** What happened?

**Michael:** Look I told yall I just want him gone. I just want him away from me and Bug.

**Snoop:** What the fuck he do to you?

(Michael is silent and just glares at Snoop. Chris sees the look and seems to understand)

**Chris:** Al'ight, we'll take care of it boss.

(Michael walks away.)

**The school.** Mr. Colvin, Dr. Parenti, and the Area Superintendant, Ms. Shepardson, met to discuss the pilot program. Mr. Colvin and Dr. Parenti gave Ms.



Shepardson a reality check about education and the world in which Tilghman Middle School students live.

**Ms. Shepardson:** You took them to a restaurant?

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, Ruth's Chris...

**Ms. Shepardson:** With napkins?...

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, silverware, more than one fork...

**Ms. Shepardson:** How'd they do?

**Mr. Colvin:** Pretty well considering

**Ms. Shepardson:** Did they embarrass us?

**Mr. Colvin:** Us? No, uh... We're fine with it; but, I mean, they were intimidated, embarrassed, and awkward as hell; but they made it through.

**Dr. Parenti:** Ms. Shepardson, these aren't the kids that are going to be able to sit still for the statewide test; much less do well on them. These are the kids that are going to make it impossible for anyone else to do well.

**Ms. Shepardson:** So we're writing them off?

**Mr. Colvin:** No, that's what we're not doing.

**Ms. Shepardson:** You're not educating them. You're socializing them.

**Dr. Parenti:** They weren't being educated before. There's no point in being obtuse.

**Ms. Shepardson:** Excuse me!!!

**Mr. Colvin:** Hold on, hold on... Look, what he's sayin' is this... I mean, you can put a textbook in front of these kids, put a problem on the blackboard, or teach 'em some problem on some statewide test... it won't matter. None of it... cuz they not learning for our world; they are learning for theirs, and they know exactly what it is they trainin' for, and what everyone expects them to be.

**Ms. Shepardson:** I expect them to be students.

**Mr. Colvin:** But it's not about you or us... or the test of the system. It's what they expect of themselves. I mean, every single one of them know they headed back to the corners. Their brothers and sisters... shit their parents... they came through these same classrooms didn't they? We pretend to teach them; they pretend to learn. Where they end up? Same damn corners. I mean, they not fools, these kids. They don't know our world, but they know their own. I mean, Jesus, they see right through us.

**Dr. Parenti:** I think we made that clear when you approved the project.

**Ms. Shepardson:** Provisionally approved...

**Dr. Parenti:** When you provisionally approved the project, we made it clear that we would be addressing children that required socialization before they could be properly educated!

**Mr. Colvin:** We can't lie... not to them.

## **Episode 11: A New Day**

In episode 11, the boys began to take on new personas. Michael, who was usually levelheaded and tried to stay away from criminal activities, began to evolve into a cold, ruthless criminal when he and the boys executed Michael's "payback" attack on a police officer who regularly treated the boys in the community unfairly and abusively.

Conversely, Namond was doing well in his new class. The motivation for this critical change stemmed from his budding relationship with Mr. Colvin. Namond was less disruptive, and had begun to show real leadership potential. He would soon move back into Mr. Mr. Pryzbylewski's class. Randy, the all around good guy and friend to most of his classmates, had become a target for his classmates. They called him a "snitch," which could be a death sentence on the street.

Dukie had become more socially and academically engaged, because of his connection with Mr. Pryzbylewski and his newfound love; the computer. Because Dukie was the most economically challenged of the boys, and was not able to eat and maintain good hygiene regularly, Mr. Prez provided him with lunch, toiletries, access to the locker room to shower before school, and clean clothes. In this episode, Dukie's world changed when he received the news that the school was socially promoting him to the ninth grade. As a result, Dukie would have to leave his friends and the comforts of Tilghman Middle.

**The street.** In this scene, the boys went to the Club Thunderbird Package Goods and Lounge to find Officer Walker and execute their plan for revenge. Officer Walker came out of the club and saw Dukie keying a car. Randy was the lookout. Officer Walker yelled at Dukie and chased him down the alley, where Michael, whose face was covered, came from behind a building and aimed a gun at him.

**Michael:** Come on! Show me your hands bitch!

**Officer Walker:** Back the fuck up lil hopper. I'm police.

**Michael:** Yeah, I know. You the police that like to fuck wit' a niggah. Turn around.

(Officer Walker keeps walking towards Michael, so he fires a shot to let him know that he means business.)

**Michael:** You ain't gonna hear the next one. Get on your knees, press them legs, get them hands, come on.

(Officer Walker gets on the ground with his hands clasped behind his head, and Namond comes from around the corner with a pail of paint. Michael sees a ring that he likes on Officer Walker's finger).

**Michael:** Ooo! Hold on... (Michael pulls down the bandana from his face.)

**Namond:** Yo, what the fuck you doin'? What the fuck is wrong wit' you man?

**Michael:** Give up that ring, man (Michael places the gun on Officer Walker's back). Come on.

(Walker takes off the ring and Michael takes it. Namond splashes yellow paint over Walker's head)

**Michael:** Pay back.

**Officer Walker:** That's right, run mutha fuckas!!! Shit.

Later, Michael and Namond were on the street looking in the window of a jewelry store or pawnshop. Michael was looking at a chain for the ring he took from Officer Walker. Namond noticed a difference in Michael and he gave examples of the change (e.g. taking his mask off when confronting Officer Walker, taking the ring from Walker, fighting the boys who accused Randy of snitching).

**Namond:** I know one thing, I won't walk around wit it on my neck for Walker to find.

**Michael:** He ain't gone find it.

**Namond:** You crazy for even takin' a chance. If he catch you wit' it, he gone break more than them fingers. Man what up wit you? It's like lately you goin all...like takin' off that mask yo. What up wit that? If Walker got a look...

**Michael:** He didn't.

**Namond:** What about the thing wit' you and Randy? Everybody now sayin' you threw down wit him. Busted up the boy Dimples an' them.

**Michael:** Yo, you wouldn'ta stood tall?

**Namond:** That's not what I'm sayin. It's not that you do shit; it's how you do it.

**Michael:** Yo look, I'm not tryin' to stand around and let no chump ass niggahs think I'm shook. I ain't.

**The school (Randy).** In this scene, Randy went to the 7th grade lunch period to conduct his usual candy sales. The students there called Randy a snitch again.

**Randy:** Yo today's specials are those little Hersey bars, 3 for a dime (once he sits down, students begin to get up from the table); and I got all your other favorites too. Yo Dontae, I got your licorice...red and black both.

**Student (Dontae):** Snitchin' Randy

(Dontae leaves from the table and Randy is left sitting at the table alone)

**The school (Namond).** In the following scene, Mr. Colvin positively reinforced Namond's progress in class and informed Namond that he was proud of him for volunteering to do a trust fall in class the day before, given all of the students in Namond's class have learned not to trust. Mr. Colvin also indicated that he believed Namond was ready to go back to his regular classroom. One of the profound pieces in this scene is Namond's view of the regular classroom. He believes the information taught in school is "deadly."

**Mr. Colvin:** You showed me something gettin' on that box like that.

**Namond:** That wasn't nothing.

**Mr. Colvin:** Don't sell yourself short. We all thought it took courage; especially considering how y'all do each other.

**Namond:** You think?

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah (Laughter). No look, you showin' alot of progress in class. I mean, you know that don't you? You doin' the work, you not actin' out. I mean, it's getting to the point where you can go back to regular class; no problem.

**Namond:** Back to GenPop? You want me to go?

**Colvin:** If you're ready.

**Namond:** I ain't goin back there.

**Colvin:** Why not?

**Namond:** Shit they teach there, they be deadly. But I know you know that... Bunny. (Namond jokingly calls Mr. Colvin by his nickname).

**The school (Dukie).** Ms. Donnelly informed Dukie and five other students that the school had socially promoted them to high school. All of the students, except Dukie, were happy about the promotion. The students don't seem to care that their promotion to high school wasn't based on academic ability. Also, Ms. Donnelly told Mr. Colvin that the superintendent cut the University of Maryland Pilot Program.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Well, young man, your wish is come true.

**Student1:** Yo, this mean I can finally get outta here?

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Yes, Monell. Paperwork was slow coming in from North Ave., but five are at the age where we feel it's to your advantage to join your peers in the 9th grade.

**Student 2:** Yo, we in high school!

**Student1:** Yo, when we bump?

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** At the end of this marking period. Congratulations. You're excused.

Mr. Colvin arrived just as the students received the news of their promotion.

**Colvin:** Bad news?

**Donnelly:** Plenty more to go around. They pulled the pen on your program.

After finding out the pilot program had been cut, the University of Maryland team and Ms. Donnelly met again, with the Area Superintendant and another North Avenue Representative, to discuss the program and what it would take to keep it.

**Dr. Parenti:** Our attendance is excellent and as for suspensions, we don't have any. We intervene immediately and we show success in stabilizing behavior.

**Mr. Colvin:** Not to mention world o' good we doin for the classes these kids were wreckin' before the program.

**Dr. Parenti:** In January, we could expand to four classes...cover the whole 8th grade. Any complaints about the tracking; anything from the parents?

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** This isn't a group where we see alot of parental intervention.

**Ms. Shepardson:** What about test scores?

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** I can't speak to the program itself but it has to help the rest of the 8th grade. Next week will tell.

**Ms. Shepardson:** Right now, the system is under alot of scrutiny. We have certain fiscal issues that are of great concern to the new administration and what you're proposing here is a radical shift in curricula.

**Dr. Parenti:** Meaning...?

**Shepardson:** If city hall were to sign off on this, we could go forward; but now is not the time to rock any boats (given it is election season).

### **Episode 12: That's Got His Own**

In this episode, Michael demonstrated his continual devolution into a gangster. He received combat tactics from Chris and Snoop, and he brutally beat up Kennard, the youngest on the street and one of Namond's lieutenants, for lying and stealing the drugs he was supposed to keep safely hidden for Namond.

The episode further revealed Namond's inability to be a real gangster and follow the rules of the street. When Namond realized Kennard had stolen and lied about the drugs, Namond was supposed to beat him to teach him a lesson. Instead, Michael and Namond's mother reinforced the lesson. When Michael executed the beating because Namond was unable to do it himself, Namond tried to recover his gangster status by picking on Dukie. Michael felt he had watched Namond play this fake role long enough and decided to address Namond's weakness by slapping him. This altercation changed Namond and Michael's relationship and confirmed Namond's observations that Michael had changed.

Randy's situation had taken a turn for the worst. Since the other students had labeled him a snitch on the street, he and his foster mother were in danger. The police had posted guards at their home, in an effort to protect them; but the police's efforts were in vain. Someone from the neighborhood set Randy's house on fire. His foster mother suffered fatal burns and eventually died, as a result.

Like Randy, Dukie's situation deteriorated significantly in this episode. On his way home from school, he saw that his family had been evicted. When he saw that Dukie had no family members in sight to comfort him or to tell him where they would

sleep that night, Michael allowed Dukie to stay with him and Bug. Michael had moved out of his mother's house, into an apartment funded by Marlo Stanfield. Interestingly, while all of these major things were happening with the students on the street, they were also trying to prepare to take the Maryland State Assessment.

**The streets become the school.** In this scene, Michael practiced combat tactics with Chris and Snoop using paint guns. Michael shot both Chris and Snoop without getting hit once. Chris and Snoop were impressed with his skills.

(Chris is on the ground and Michael approaches)

**Chris:** What's next?

**Michael:** One to the head, I keep it quick.

**Snoop:** Not yet mutha fucka. Shoot live rounds like paint, boy, you be the shit. You hear me?

**Michael:** Yo, but these really do look like glocks.

**Chris:** Yeah, they make'em look that way. Yo, why you shoot low?

**Michael:** Too close, aim for the head. If not, think vest. It's the way you said it.

**Snoop:** Al'ight, the boy's learnin'.

**The school, family, and the street become one.** Kennard, Namond's Lieutenant, tells Namond that someone stole the drug package/stash. Namond investigated the theft, and realized Kennard lied about the package. Namond told his mom about the situation, and she concluded that Kennard needed to be beaten. Namond tried to take a gentler approach. Based on his response, Namond's mother told him he was not a man like his father. Her comments also provided an understanding for how she defined love and manhood.

**De'Londa:** What you mean Kennard took the stash? And he still walkin' around?

**Namond:** I'mma talk to him ma, make sure this never happen again.

**De'Londa:** Look at me boy!!! Kennard got to feel some pain for what he did. He got to.

**Namond:** I don't...

**De'Londa:** You don't what muthafucka!!! Dis how you pay me back for all the love I show. Shit, I been kept you in Nikes since you were in diapers.

**Namond:** I'm tryin'

**De'Londa:** You tryin' huh? That's what you gonna tell your father the next time you see him? That you tryin'!!! Or you gonna tell him what you've done?

**Namond:** Well he done got him locked up!!! (Mom slaps Namond)

**De'Londa:** That's right. Wee-Bay walked in Jessup a man and he gone walk out one. But you out here, wearin' his name, actin' a Bitch!!! Awh look at you cryin' now. Fuck you think you goin'? Get yo ass back here, I ain't done talkin' to you. (Namond leaves the house).

Prior to talking with his mom about the situation, Namond shared the matter with Michael. Michael agreed the situation must be “handled.” Namond and Michael approached Kennard about his lies regarding the package. Kennard replied aggressively, but Namond chose not to fight him. Michael ended up executing Namond’s “dirty work.” Michael learned that Namond did not really want the package, and Michael became confused by Namond's reaction. Namond was equally confused by the change in Michael's behavior.

**Namond:** Hey yo, Kennard. Why you lie to me?

**Kennard:** Fuck you talkin' bout?

**Namond:** You said the police kicked your door in. I seen the door; they ain't kick shit in. How you gone lie?

**Kennard:** Go on man.

**Namond:** Where the package at man?

**Kennard:** Package up my ass Gump.

**Namond:** Yo I'mma have to...

**Kennard:** You about to...gone on whoop...Gump ass muthafucka.

(Namond doesn't say or do anything. Michael begins to beat up Kennard)

**Michael:** Ya'll was talking too goddamn much. Go head Nate, get your pack off this bitch so we can go.

**Namond:** I ain't want it!! I ain't want it!! (Namond runs away)

Later, Michael and Dukie were in the gym when Namond arrives. Michael and Namond had not spoken since the incident with Kennard. Namond tried to talk to Michael, but Michael ignored him. Namond tried to recover or save face from the



incident by picking on Dukie, but Michael would not allow Namond to continue with the façade.

**Namond:** What's goin on Mike? Damn yo, I feel like I could just pancake a youngin right now, you know what I mean?

(Michael continues to work on the bag and ignores Namond. Namond walks away and begins to pick on Dukie.)

**Namond:** What about you Duke, want some go?

**Dukie:** Nawh, I'mma work this rope.

**Namond:** Yeah, you workin it...like a Gump!! (Michael stops for a second on the bag and Namond turns to look at Michael)

(Michael pushes Namond from behind and slaps Namond with an open hand. Coach Cutty breaks up the altercation).

**Michael:** Man fuck this! (Michael leaves the gym and Namond begins to cry.)

**Coach Cutty:** Yeah go on home! Get! Nobody want you in here no way!

Namond collected himself and talked to Sergeant Carver and Coach Cutty.

Namond admitted what everybody else already knew; he was not like his father. He also indicated that Michael had changed. Namond also feared that he could not go home because of his mother's expectations.

**Namond:** What am I gone do?

**Sgt. Carver:** I'll run you home.

**Namond:** I can't go home. She expect me to be my father, but I ain't him. I mean the way he is an' shit. It just ain't in me.

**Coach Cutty:** What's between you and Michael?

**Namond:** Mike ain't Mike no more. He went hard on this boy last night, fucked his shit up. I can't go home. I can't.

Namond went to the police station with Sergeant Carver. Sergeant Carver took him there because Namond had no where else to go, since his fight with his mother concerning Kennard.

**Namond:** Yo, what my mom say when you called? She was mad right?

**Sgt. Carver:** Not really.

(Mr. Colvin walks in. We can assume Sergeant Carver called him.)

**Sgt. Carver:** His mother...

**Mr. Colvin:** Lovely lady. What she say?

**Sgt. Carver:** "Put that Bitch in baby booking where he belongs. Let him learn somethin'." She hung up before I could tell her we didn't have a charge.

In the next scene, Sgt. Carver went to Randy's house. Randy was still home from school because his foster mother, Miss Anna, was not ready for him to go back after the school house altercation where Randy is called a snitch. She was concerned that the students would attack him at school or that something would happen to him while she was at work. For their protection, Sgt. Carver placed a plain clothed police officer on surveillance duty.

(Sgt. Carver knocks on the door)

**Sgt. Carver:** How you doin' dog? (speaking to Randy; his mom joins him at the door) Quiet over night. You going to school this morning?

**Ms. Anna:** We're gonna wait a little longer on that to be sure. But I can't say I'm comfortable going to work every day and leaving him here.

**Sgt. Carver:** Blow over in a week or so; you'll see. Till then we still have a car on the house and you have my cell number if anything comes up. We're gonna look out for you on this (talking to Randy).

**The school.** Mr. Pryzbylewski and Ms. Donnelly discussed Dukie's promotion to high school. Mr. Pryzbylewski expressed that he did not feel Dukie was ready for high school. Ms. Donnelly revealed that she had noticed how Mr. Pryzbylewski took care of Dukie, but reminded him that neither Dukie nor the other students were his children and he needed to let go.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I understand what you're saying. Some of those kids are ready for high school, but not Duquan. I...

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Adopted him. I've noticed Duquan this semester. He's more nurtured, wears fresher clothes, sometimes he even smells like soap. You and your wife, you don't have children do you?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Not yet, no...

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Well have some, for better for worse they're yours for life. The kids in this school aren't yours. You do your piece with them and you let them go. Because there will be plenty more comin' up behind Duquan...and they're gonna need your help too. You've got your third period in 5 min. right?

Dukie was confused about his promotion to high school; he thought he had done something wrong and this was his punishment. Despite his objection to the move, Mr. Pryzbylewski encouraged and reassured Dukie that he would do well at his new school. In addition, Mr. Pryzbylewski offered to allow Dukie to continue to come to Tilghman to shower. He also offered to continue to wash Dukie's clothes.

**Dukie:** Did I do somethin' wrong? I ain't acted up or nothin'.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You're ready for this. You can do the work. I know you can. And if you need to come back here and use the showers or give me laundry, use the computer; you can do that anytime.

**Dukie:** Anyway, let me show you; this here the way to the hard drive.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** This isn't necessary Duquan.

**Dukie:** Just in case I'm busy Mr. P, so you know how to work it.

**The family.** On their way home from school, Dukie and Michael discussed how high school would be different from middle school. Dukie also learned that his family had been evicted again and that Michael had moved away from home. Michael offered to allow Dukie stay with him and Bug in their new apartment, which was funded by drug kinpin--Marlow Stanfield.

**Dukie:** Seen them girls at Douglas man?

**Michael:** Yo, you right Duke. Ain't gonna be like middle school no more.

**Dukie:** I'm just thinkin yo...

(The boys arrive at Dukie's house, and Dukie sees his family has been evicted again. Their belongings are in the middle of the street.)

**Dukie:** Dag man, not again.

**Michael:** Where your people at now? Need any of your stuff from the pile?

**Dukie:** It ain't no thing.

**Michael:** Yo man, listen. Me and Bug got our own spot; so you can come crib wit' us if you want. (Dukie nods his head in agreement.)

**The school.** Despite Mr. Pryzbylewski and Mr. Colvin's challenges with having the student's take the Maryland State Assessment, both teachers were forced to "teach to the test" in an effort to meet annual yearly progress<sup>5</sup> (AYP) as sanctioned by No Child Left Behind. In Mr. Pryzbylewski's class, the students prepared for the test.

**Prez:** Come on let's get to the test material. The statewide exam is next week and then we'll get back to the regular lessons.

In class, Namond spoke about feeling tricked with having to take the statewide test. Mr. Colvin agreed, and Dr. Parenti acknowledged the test did not speak to the student's world.

**Teacher:** Look at your sample test.

**Namond:** I gotta say Ms. Duckett, feel like y'all schemed us. This class same as the ones down the hall.

**Student 1 (Zenobia):** Yeah, it's cuz the test comin' up.

**Teacher:** Okay class, let's take a look at the sample math test.

(Mr. Colvin and Dr. Parenti are in the class observing)

**Mr. Colvin:** The kid's right; this is bullshit.

**Dr. Parenti:** Test doesn't exactly speak to their world.

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, it don't speak too loud to mine either.

### **Episode 13: Final Grades**

In this final episode of season 4, the boys settled into their new lives. Dukie attempted to stay connected to school and embrace the ninth grade, but the pressures were too great. In an attempt to survive and have some sense of family and connectivity, Dukie quite school and joined the drug trade with Michael.

---

<sup>5</sup> Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

When Randy's foster mother died, he moved to a group home, despite Sergeant Carver's attempts to find him a foster placement. Sergeant Carver was frustrated, because the police system, the school system, and the social services system had failed Randy. Randy had done nothing to deserve this life.

Namond returned to his regular classroom due to his growth while participating in the University of Maryland Pilot Program. On the first day back in Mr. Pryzbylewski's class, he executed his new leadership style, role, and authority when a student who had been in the program with him, tried to revert to his old disruptive ways. Namond and the other classmates scrutinized their classmate's behavior. In the end, Mr. Colvin saved Namond's life by appealing to Namond's father; requesting that he be allowed to raise Namond.

By this episode, Michael had fully embraced his new role as a criminal. He murdered two people and took over Bodie's corner. Despite his new criminal status, he continued to promote education with Bug, with the hope that his old dreams and aspirations would become a reality through his brother.

**The school.** Dukie was alone and afraid as he approached his new school. The students walking behind began to push and make fun of him. Dukie retreated and left the school grounds.

**The family.** Sergeant Carver worked to get Randy another foster home, but the social services system was extremely challenging to navigate.

**Sgt. Carver:** Why can't you just make an exception in this case and move his name to the top of the list? See that he gets another foster parent?

**Social Services Rep.:** The list is the list. Some clients have been in group homes for years.

**Sgt. Carver:** He was in group homes for years. Now he's gotta go back..?!

**Social Services Rep.:** Please don't raise your voice. If you want to raise your voice...

**Sgt. Carver:** Please...there's gotta be some way that he doesn't have to go...yeah there is...there's gotta be. How bout...how about if I take him as a foster parent.

**Social Services Rep.:** The screening process takes three to four months. This child can't be in your custody sergeant. He needs to come back under our supervision per the juvenile order.

Sergeant Carver took Randy to the group home, and Randy thanked Sergeant Carver for trying to help him. Later, Randy entered his room at the group home and saw that someone had carved "snitch bitch" on his bed frame. The boys in the home entered the room and brutally beat Randy.

**The family.** Through Coach Cutty, Mr. Colvin scheduled a meeting with Namond's father, Wee-Bay. His goal was to ask Wee-Bay for permission to raise Namond, in an effort to give Namond a chance at a better life.

**Wee-Bay:** I remember you. Used to be a roll-up on Penzy and Freemont.

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, that was my old post.

**Wee-Bay:** I came up wit' CBS.

**Mr. Colvin:** Calhoun, Baker, Stricker. Yeah I used to bang up on y'all all the time.

**Wee-Bay:** I remember that too.

**Mr. Colvin:** I ain't a cop now. I mean, like I told Cutty, I'm sorta like a teacher now, and that's how I come to know Namond.

**Wee-Bay:** Only reason I'm even here cuz Cutty spoke for you.

**Mr. Colvin:** He say what I'm askin'? Your boy is smart and funny and open hearted. He got some flex in him, and I ain't see it at first, cuz he was always actin' out. Always full of corner talk, you know, just talkin' shit to hide hisself. He could go a lot of places and do alot of things in his life...be out there in the world in a way that didn't happen for you and me...I mean, the West side we knew; it's dead man. People in the game nowadays...I mean, it's a whole different breed. No code, no family, damn sure no respect. I mean, you send Namond out on them corners now; you givin' him 1, 2 years maybe-- before he down at the morgue. And maybe, if you're lucky, up here wit' you.

**Wee-Bay:** Maybe...maybe not. That's the game.

**Mr. Colvin:** I'm talkin' bout Namond here, Mr. Brice. He's a lot of things, a lot of good things... I mean, before you know, he might surprise all of us given half a chance, but he ain't made for them corners man. I mean, not like we were. That's why I come down here, cuz I gotta believe that you see it. Being who you are and all that you've been through. You know your son. It's in your hands man.

**Wee-Bay:** You askin too much.  
**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, but I'm askin'.

Later, after Wee-Bay had a chance to consider Mr. Colvin's request, he discussed the matter with Namond's mother, De'Londa.

**Wee-Bay:** And you put him out, huh?  
**De'Londa:** He need to get hard.  
**Wee-Bay:** Well, if he out; then he out.  
**De'Londa:** Oh no, you not. You ain't gonna take my son away from me. Not for these...  
**Wee-Bay:** Remember who the fuck you talkin to right here!! Remember who I am. My word is still my word; in here, in Baltimore, and in any place you can think of callin' home...It'll be my word that find you. Man come down here to say my son can be anything he damn please.  
**De'Londa:** Except a soldier...  
**Wee-Bay:** Yeah, well, look at me up in here. Who the fuck would wanna be that if they could be anything else, De'Londa?  
**De'Londa:** So, you cuttin' me off too?  
**Wee-Bay:** You still got me. We'll get by, but you gonna let go of that boy. Bet that...

**The school.** The student's in Mr. Pryzbylewski's class took the statewide test. Michael appeared to be absent, Dukie had been promoted to high school, and Randy was absent due to the snitching ordeal. In Namond's class, the students were also taking the statewide test, but some students had decided to ignore the exam.

In this episode, Michael dropped out of school; and as a demonstration of his full emersion into the criminal world, he murdered Bodie. The day after the murder, Marlo and the crew arrived at Michael's apartment. Marlo informed Michael that he was giving him Bodie's old corner, and that he would get a profit from the sales. Despite the change in Michael's life, he still worked to ensure that he took care of his brother, Bug, and that he attended school regularly.

(Dukie and Bug come down the stairs)  
**Dukie:** I'll go get Bug ready for school.  
**Marlo:** You ready to put in work?

**Michael:** (Nods his head in affirmation)

**Marlo:** Two things, then. First, we gone give you the corner up on Payson; used to be Bodie's old corner. Now, it's yours. Crew that up; run that shit, and you get the points on that shop. Then we got this other thing.

Later that day, Michael murdered his second victim.

**Chris:** You can look 'em in the eye now. No matter who he is or what he's done; you look 'em right in the eye.

The same day, Dr. Parenti and Mr. Colvin met with representatives from the Mayor's office to discuss the pilot program.

**Representative 1:** This is tracking plain and simple.

**Dr. Parenti:** It's a socialization process.

**Representative 1:** To any parent that complains; you're still segregating them.

**Mr. Colvin:** It's for their benefit and for the benefit of the teachers trying to teach.

**Representative 2:** And you're proposing to expand this to every middle school?

**Dr. Parenti:** With enough grant money and your support, yes. By September...

**Representative 1:** But you wouldn't be teaching test curriculum here? These would be the children left behind, so to speak.

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, but as it is, we're leaving them all behind anyway. We just don't want to admit it.

**Dr. Parenti:** What we mean to say is...

**Representative 1:** Gentlemen, we'll be in touch.

(Dr. Parenti and Mr. Colvin leave the meeting)

**Mr. Colvin:** So...what? That's it? A ten minute hearing, they stick a fork in us? I'm a liability in there man!! Seems like everytime I open my mouth in this town, I'm tellin' them something they don't want to know.

**Dr. Parenti:** It's the process.

**Mr. Colvin:** The process?!

**Dr. Parenti:** We'll get the grant. We study the problem; we propose solutions. If they listen, they listen. If they don't, it still makes for great research. What we publish from this is going to get a lot of attention.

**Mr. Colvin:** From who?

**Dr. Parenti:** From other researchers...academics.

**Mr. Colvin:** Academics? What they gonna study? Your study? When do this shit change?



In the closing scene of season 4, it appears Namond has moved in with Mr. Colvin and his wife. Namond sat on the porch of Mr. Colvin's house doing homework before school.

**Mr. Colvin's wife:** Nate you gonna be late.

**Mr. Colvin:** Come on let's go. (Walking over to Namond; tapping him on the shoulder

(Namond gets up and gathers his things before he goes into the house)

**Mr. Colvin's wife:** Boy, where's your plate?

Namond went back outside to get his breakfast plate when Donut, one his neighborhood friends, pulled up in a stolen car. Donut waved, but kept driving. Namond stared for a moment as Donut drove away and approached the intersection. The intersection seemed to represent choices and different paths in life. The intersection may have been a metaphor for Namond's new life. Now that he was in a different environment and had a different mindset; he had real options for his life. He could choose any life path that he desired, including a return to the street.

## **Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to provide a contextual foundation for the representations of the boys in the overall narrative of *The Wire*. I provided an overview of season 4 through the exploration of each episode's focus on the school system and the families of Duquan (Dukie), Michael, Namond, and Randy. I specifically explored the school and the family because they served as the undergirding to help explain and inform how and why the boys may have utilized the three dimensions of cool pose highlighted in this study. With the tensions that exist between the portrayal of the boys and the portrayal

of the school system and the families of the boys, we begin to see the emergent themes that go beyond the scope of the historical tropes.

After reviewing all thirteen episodes of season 4 of *The Wire*, six themes emerged that reflect the context of cool pose. These themes included the ideas of standing tall, clothes make the man, playing it cool, connectedness, safety, and protection. I will discuss each of these emergent themes in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: The Boys and Cool Pose

Season 4 of *The Wire* offered intricate portrayals of Duquan (Dukie), Michael, Namond, and Randy. Chapter 4 illustrated the ways the myriad of challenges these boys faced, shaped their lives and forced them to make hard decisions to survive the streets. This chapter presents a full portrait of the four characters examined in this study, to provide greater clarity about each portrayal. These portraits will allow me to discuss the emergent themes illustrated in Chapter 4 and compare the representations of the four boys to both the historical tropes presented by Brown and Kraehe (2011) and the three highlighted dimensions of cool.

As mentioned in the summary of Chapter 4, four key themes emerged in my examination of season 4 of *The Wire*:

- stand tall and be a soldier (social delinquent),
- clothing makes the man (social delinquent),
- play it cool (trickster), and
- connectedness, safety, and protection (social delinquent).

Each of these four themes reflects the context of cool pose.

To *stand tall and be a soldier*, one must be fearless and courageous in any situation. The concept that *clothing makes the man* refers to the use of clothing to denote one's wealth and level of masculinity. To *play it cool* means to maneuver through any system to achieve an ultimate goal. The theme *connectedness, safety and protection* refers to the need to feel a sense of community. These emergent themes have a relationship with the historical tropes discussed in Chapter 2, in that one can see glimpses of the tropes in the portrayal of the four boys. However, given the complexity and the

fullness of the character portrayals, viewers should not consider these themes to be stereotypical portrayals, but rather the evolution of the historical tropes. Granted, the depictions initially may appear stereotypical, but the writers developed the characters in a way that moves the portrayals beyond the scope of the historical tropes and into new representations.

Briefly revisiting the four types of cool and the historical tropes will aid in providing comprehensive portraits of the boys and subsequent discussions of the emergent themes. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Connor (2003) identified four types of cool: revolutionary cool, middle-class cool, electronic cool, and street cool. Street cool was the model most relevant to this study, because behavior associated with this archetype is anger, daring, impulsive, and the model “deals the most in style and symbols” (p. 19). Given the uncertainty and volatile nature of the streets, the literature suggests that individuals must convey street cool quickly, through their appearance, attitude, and the ability to defend themselves. Having street cool is a title that a Black man must receive from his male peers, based his ability to convey true confidence, fearlessness, strength, and leadership. Simply wearing the symbols of cool (e.g., clothing) does not constitute true street cool. The overview of season 4, presented in Chapter 4, highlighted these characteristics of street cool in the portrayal of the four boys; therefore street cool was the most appropriate type of cool to explore for this study.

In this study, I employed three dimensions of cool: masculinity, male identity, and masking. I also identified three historical tropes for use in this study: social delinquent, mental inferior, and trickster. The historical tropes are “common stereotypical, racist tropes that have historically been used to portray Black Americans in the media” (Brown

& Kraehe, 2011, p. 78). I used three dimensions of cool and three historical tropes to answer my research question “what cultural messages are conveyed about masculinity and academics through four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*?”

In the remainder of the chapter, I will share the character portraits and use examples to demonstrate how each aspect of cool was evident in the portrayal of each character. I will go on to examine how these aspects of cool relate to the historical tropes. Finally, I will present the emergent themes.

### **The Portraits**

I present the character portraits of Duquan, Michael, Namond and Randy below. After each portrait, I share the themes that emerged from the relationship between the dimensions of cool and the historical tropes.

**Duquan “Dukie” Weems.** Because of his socio-economic status, Dukie was an outcast among his peers. Of his three friends, Dukie represented the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder. He lived in a house with his mother, one unidentified male, and possibly other relatives; all of whom were drug addicts. Because they were consumed by their drug use, the adults in Dukie’s life failed to address all living necessities; the utilities were frequently turned off, little to no food was available, and the family had been evicted from their home at least twice. Dukie’s parents and family members sold his school uniforms, which the school donated to him, to acquire money for drugs. Dukie was a neglected child. He had only fetid clothing to wear and he was not able to take care of his personal hygiene. Despite his personal challenges, he never got into trouble and had a pleasant, helpful attitude.

Because of his living situation, Dukie's classmates either teased or ignored him, which led to his very reserved and quite demeanor. Despite his appearance and lack of good hygiene, Michael, Randy, and Namond maintained their friendship with Dukie. However, Namond constantly challenged Dukie. Namond and his mother treated Dukie like a second-class citizen; as Dukie was not allowed to enter their home. It appeared that Namond tolerated Dukie to remain friends with Michael and Randy. Dukie was the most vulnerable of the four boys, and he appeared weak; but when challenged by Namond, he had no problem standing up for himself and letting Namond, and any observers, know that he was "no punk."

Initially, Dukie appeared to be a very disconnected student. He could drop out of school without resistance from his family, but it appeared that his friends motivated him to attend regularly. School may also have been his only opportunity to escape the challenges of his home life. In episode 3, we see Dukie on the first day of school in Mr. Pryzbylewski's math class. Instead of paying attention to his teacher, Dukie is slouched down at his desk, and intently focused on a miniature handheld fan that he found on the street on the way to school. Dukie did not become present in the moment until one of his female classmates, sitting nearby, belittled him when she referred to his personal hygiene and asked to move to another seat.

From episode 3 to episode 6, Dukie appeared to be disengaged with school. In fact, these episodes suggested that he might have needed special educational services; but in episode 7, we come to understand that Dukie is very bright. He is good at math, and he is a computer whiz. His skills became evident through the efforts of Mr. Pryzbylewski. First, Mr. Pryzbylewski became aware of Dukie's unstable family life,

because he frequently gave Dukie uniforms issued through the school. Mr. Pryzbylewski quickly realized that even though he gave Dukie the clothes, Dukie would not wear them to school. Mr. Pryzbylewski became curious and inquired about Dukie's situation through one of Dukie's classmates. After the stunning revelation that Dukie's family sold his clothes for drug money, Mr. Pryzbylewski took a personal interest in Dukie, and began to provide him with toiletries, use of the school shower before class time, occasional lunches, and an offer to wash Dukie's clothes. Mr. Pryzbylewski also allowed Dukie to spend most of his class time on the class computer.

In an effort to find dice to help his students learn probabilities, Mr. Pryzbylewski discovered brand new math books and a computer in the school supply room. Surprised and stunned at his discovery, Mr. Pryzbylewski brought the materials into his classroom for his students to utilize. After Mr. Pryzbylewski brought the computer into the classroom, Dukie was at the computer during every class session. Dukie helped his classmates surf the internet and solve math problems using the new system.

Through Mr. Pryzbylewski's untraditional teaching methods, his refusal to "teach to the test" to meet the mandates of *No Child Left Behind*, and his personal care for Dukie; Dukie entered into a new world, where he was more socially accepted and had more confidence personally and academically. Prior to Mr. Pryzbylewski's discovery of the computer, Dukie was very quiet; but in the following excerpts from episode 8, we see that Dukie gained new confidence. In the first example, the students were doing class work, and some students found the work challenging.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** No talking. Keep your eyes on your paper.

**Student 1:** Yo, Mr. Prezbo, this say cars.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** So...?

**Student 1:** All that stuff we did in practice was about food.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** It's ok, it's just a different object. Pay attention to the number.

**Student 2:** Numbers are messed up too. We never did  $1/3$ s .

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** It's the same operation... $1/4$ ,  $1/5$ ,  $1/3$ ...follow the same steps. It's just a different denominator.

**Student 3:** How you get  $1/3$  of a car?

**Dukie:** It's actually  $1/3$  of all the cars.

**Student 3:** Was I talkin to you!?

(The student is mad and storms out of the class. The others students laugh, including Randy. Randy looks at Dukie as if to say, "What is wrong with her?" Dukie shrugs his shoulders to say, "I don't know." Dukie is smiling and appears unbothered by the outburst.)

Dukie also demonstrated his newfound confidence through his demonstration of his computer savviness. The scene below took place after school in Mr. Pryzbylewski's classroom. Dukie played a game on the computer.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I gotta leave soon, Duquan.

**Dukie:** Ok.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** What level are you on?

**Dukie:** 12...

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Ah, I never made it past 10.

**Dukie:** Wanna see me get to 40?

(Dukie does something on the keyboard and a window appears with the text, "Cheat Mode Active! Jumping to level 40")

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** That's cheating.

**Dukie:** Want me to show you how?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** (Smiles and nods his head yes)

**Dukie:** (Returns the smile)

In episode 11, the school socially promoted Dukie to the ninth grade in the middle of the academic year. Ms. Donnelly, the assistant principal, told Dukie and four other classmates, "Paperwork was slow coming in from North Ave., but the five of you are at the age where we feel it's to your advantage to join your peers in the 9th grade." Dukie was not happy about this change. He was just getting on track (e.g., social acceptance, assistance with personal hygiene, access to computer, established relationship with Mr.



Prez), and the school was making him leave his friends and go to another school, where he would have to get re-adjusted and possibly suffer more humiliation. On the same day, he learned of his social promotion, his family was evicted from their home. Michael offered to allow Dukie to stay with him and his little brother Bug, in an apartment funded by Marlo Stanfield, the current drug kingpin. The changes in Dukie's life placed him in a critical decision-making moment. Would he continue with school or would he choose the streets? Out of desperation, he moved in with Michael, quit school, and finally became a member of the drug cartel.

***Social delinquent.*** The traits of Dukie's character suggest that he was not a social delinquent; nor was he particularly masculine, by traditional standards. On the contrary, Dukie's character came across as an emasculated African American male. Dukie's community had emasculated him because of his economic status; but despite the stripping of his manhood, he managed to maintain a degree of masculinity when he stood up to Namond's bullying. Dukie's response to Namond suggested that he was aware of the code of the street. He recognized that despite his economic situation and his vulnerable, weak, and down trodden appearance; he was capable of defending himself. He understood that he had to send a strong message to fend off any onlookers who might try to make him a regular target of bullying. For example, in Chapter 4, I shared an excerpt from episode 1 where Namond tried to bully Dukie, but Dukie retaliated.

**Namond:** Hey you a seriously backwards dude; you know that right? Playin' wit' bugs like he still in pampers.

**Dukie:** Naw, you da one that need pampers; put 'em over dat mouf you got. Catch all dat shit you be flushin'.

(The neighborhood boys laugh at Dukie's comments and seem a bit impressed by what he said. Someone in the background asked Namond, "You gonna let him talk to you like that?")

**Namond:** Yo, you be stinkin' like rat fart (Namond pushes Dukie and Dukie retaliates with flailing fists).

(A boy in background comments on how Dukie hit Namond on the side of the head.)

**Namond:** Only because I didn't want to get to close and touch the dirty muthafucka...woulda came up with AIDS or some shit like that.

**Boy in the background:** Dukie fight like a bitch, yo.

(The boys laugh and turn in the opposite direction to leave.)

The next three examples further demonstrate how Dukie was emasculated in episode 1. In these episodes, Dukie offered no effort to retaliate. He simply sank into his shell. His lack of retaliation, however, demonstrated a high level of cool, because he was able to silently endure rejection and invisibility, and live his life as an outcast. Rather than allow himself to go into an abyss of drugs and alcohol, crime, or hostile behavior, he maintained a demeanor of goodness.

*Example 1.* In the first example, when a warring group of neighborhood boys attacked Dukie, Randy developed a plan for retaliation. The boys decided to launch a urine-filled balloon attack. The four boys, along with their friends, were hanging out behind what appeared to be the shipping area of a vacant building. All of the boys were drinking soda to make them urinate enough to fill up multiple balloons. Dukie told his friends that thinking of running water would help them to urinate.

**Namond:** How the fuck you know what running water be like dude? Water been off in your house since last year.

(The boys laugh, and Dukie stops talking and reverts into his shell.)

After the balloon attack, the boys reconvene at an ice cream truck, and Namond offers to buy ice cream for everyone except Dukie. This excerpt is significant, because it

helps to inform the audience about the character of each boy. The character traits demonstrated in this passage plays out for most of season 4. I will discuss the significance of this excerpt in each character portrait.

(Dukie, Namond, and Randy are standing by the ice cream truck.)

**Dukie:** Hey yo, Namond, I'll pay you back.

**Namond:** Niggah you ain't nevah gonna have no money.

(Dukie backs up and looks down, sad and downtrodden. Michael walks down the street toward the boys)

**Randy:** Yo Michael, there go you.

**Michael:** It's nothing man. Everybody made it back tho, right?

**Randy:** Naw, Marquis had to get stitches. He got hit with a brick.

**Michael** (talking to Namond): I see you changed clothes already.

(Michael appears to be irritated with Namond, and Namond just shies away and turns his head)

**Randy:** He had to; he was stinkin' (one of the urine balloons bursts in Namond's hand when he was trying to throw one at one of Terrace boys. This caused the fight to go awry and probably made Namond a bit embarrassed).

**Namond:** Yo Randy man, that was the stupidest thing you ever thought of.

(Namond tries to deflect the attention from his embarrassing moment. Randy takes the insult and looks down in sadness. All the boys laugh it off. To ease the tension, Namond offers to buy everyone ice cream.)

**Namond:** Yo you want somethin' before he bounce? (asking Michael if he wants ice cream). I'm buyin'...one for every soldier that stood tall.

**Dukie:** I was down there.

**Namond:** Man, fuck you Duke.

(Michael looks at Namond in disapproval. Namond reconsiders, pulls out a roll of bills and gives Dukie a dollar).

*Example 2.* The second example took place during the first day of school for the fall semester. Michael, Randy, and Dukie were walking to Namond's house on their way to school. Namond's mother, De'Londa opened the door.

**De'Londa:** Look at all these big ass 8<sup>th</sup> graders out here. Look like some 6<sup>th</sup>

graders gonna get banked.<sup>6</sup> (The boys laugh.)

**Namond:** Yo, come in here. I wanna show y'all somethin'.

(Michael and Randy go in, and Dukie slowly approaches the door. Namond's mother looks at Dukie in disgust and closes the door in his face; leaving him on the stoop alone while the other boys are inside.

*Example 3.* In the third example, Dukie and his friends were in their homeroom class. Mr. Pryzbylewski was attempting get to know the students and share his agenda for the class period. One of the female students interrupted him to complain about Dukie's poor hygiene.

**Female Student:** Mr. Prezbo, I need to change my seat, cuz this boy right here smells like a garbage can.

(She is referring to Dukie, who is sitting next to her. The kids laugh, including Namond.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Alright, you need to work a little on your compassion skills.

**Female Student:** Yeah, he needs to work a little on his soap and water skills.

(The students laugh, and Dukie sits quietly. The female student moves to another seat)

***Mental inferior.*** I did not find that Dukie conveyed the characteristics of a mentally inferior individual. Once Mr. Pryzbylewski helped to meet his basic needs, Dukie began to come out of his shell and demonstrate his math and computers skilled, as demonstrated previously in this chapter.

***Trickster.*** Dukie also did not demonstrate traits of the trickster. He did not con anyone through cunning maneuvering. Dukie was honest. However, Dukie did convey pride, strength, and control in the face of his opponent, which was his community. He did not convey these qualities in an aggressive or disruptive manner. He did it through his silence. Dukie never complained about his circumstances. His decision not to

---

<sup>6</sup> To "get banked" means to receive a beating..

complain masked the depth of situation. Although his outward appearance and personal hygiene was an indicator of his predicament, his inner workings were an indicator of a different reality.

Cool pose gives Black men visibility in a repressive environment. In season 4 of *The Wire*, Dukie was invisible. He represented the forgotten in society. The show further demonstrated this truth through the limited focus and attention it placed on Dukie in comparison to the other characters. Dukie was frequently a part of various scenes with the other boys, but had few scenes that focused solely on him. On many occasions, he did not speak during his scenes, and the camera only briefly captured him.

***Emergent themes.*** Dukie's portrayal in season 4 of *The Wire* demonstrated the emergent theme of *connectedness, safety and protection*. Dukie was an outcast in his community. He needed to be a part of a community to survive and thrive. His connection to his three friends and to Mr. Pryzbylewski fully demonstrated how his interaction with them kept him moving forward.

**Michael Lee.** Michael's character was a true leader. He was independent; he created and walked in his own path. He had strong morals and values, and he had inner-strength, which kept him from easily falling prey the streets. He was focused and guarded, but loyal to his friends and his brother. Michael was also very smart, on the streets and in school. Michael lived with his drug-addicted mother and his little brother, Bug. Michael served as the head of the household and as a surrogate father to Bug. Michael's mother received welfare, but his economic condition was a little better than Dukie's, because Michael handled the finances for the household. He paid the bills,

bought food, and rationed money to his mother. Michael periodically sold drugs to provide for the family.

The other three boys viewed Michael as the leader of their group. He never faced challenges from them, his classmates, or other neighborhood boys. Michael was more mature than his small group of friends. He often served as a mediator when the boys had a difference of opinion, and he always provided a levelheaded perspective. People on the street recognized Michael for his inner-strength, leadership, fearlessness, and confidence. We first saw evidence of his reputation in episode 2, when Marlo Stanfield tried to recruit him into his crew. When Marlo's lieutenants offered Michael money for school clothes, unlike his friends, Michael rejected the offering. Marlo was impressed with Michael, so from episode 2 to episode 9, Marlo continued his efforts to recruit Michael to be a part of his crew.

In the second example, Bodie, the drug dealer Michael worked under during the summer before his 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, noticed Michael. Bodie wanted Michael to continue to work, but Michael rejected Bodie's offer as well.

Despite his occasional employment as a drug runner, Michael was serious about school. He demonstrated this commitment in a conversation with Bodie about needing to quit because the first day of school was to begin the next day. Bodie wanted Michael to stay, because he could see Michael's strength and business sense during a challenging drug exchange. Michael's conversation with Bodie was interesting, because it gave the audience a better understanding of Michael's level of engagement with school and it suggested that Michael had dreams and aspirations beyond the street and beyond the comprehension of everyone on the corner.

**Bodie:** Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' 'bout. You don't rattle. Yo, you come up under my wing, youngin', you ain't gonna do nothing but rise, man. I don't even know why you thinkin' about quittin'.

**Michael:** Look man, like I already told you, I'm all the way repaid and tomorrow is school.

**Bodie:** Yo man what the fuck you wanna go to school for? What you wanna be? Astronaut? Dentist? A pay lawyer, niggah? Look, check it out, why don't you just come down here after school and just work these rush hours for me. How 'bout that?

**Michael:** (Michael remains silent, because he understands that Bodie will never comprehend.)

Another example of his commitment to stay away from the drug trade occurred in episode 6, when Namond invited Michael to work with him on the corner. Michael was in the boxing gym doing floor work. Namond entered and told Michael about his new job.

**Namond:** What's good? Where the crew at?

**Michael:** Randy got him some job handing out election fliers or whatever.

**Namond:** You ain't wanna do that?

**Michael:** Hell nawh! It's bullshit, man.

**Namond:** I got a job too.

**Michael:** Word?

**Namond:** Yeah, wit' Bodie. I'm moving a package. You wanna go in it wit' me?

**Michael:** (Shakes his head no)

**Namond:** You sure? We could work together.

**Michael:** Naw man; that's your thing. Go do what you do.

In school, Michael was reserved and cautious; the same way he was on the street. He was a good student and excelled at math. He submitted his homework on time; he was attentive in class; and he received accolades from Mr. Pryzbylewski on his assignments. Michael and his classmates really came alive in class during episode 7, when Mr. Pryzbylewski turned a card game, Michael and his classmates were playing at lunchtime, into an opportunity to teach the students about probabilities. Michael asked if probabilities could work with dice, since "shooting dice" was the game they usually

played. In turn, Mr. Pryzbylewski began teaching the students probabilities using the dice.

In episode 8, Michael's world changed when Bug's father returned to the household after serving time in prison. Prior to season 4, Bug's father sexually molested Michael, so Michael was wary of him and other adult males who are "too friendly." In an effort to protect Bug, he felt he had no other choice but to take matters into his own hands. He considered help from Mr. Pryzbylewski, the school, and social services to have Bug's father removed from the house; but he did not trust any of them and was afraid that someone would separate him from his brother. He essentially wanted to keep his current family unit intact. Seeing no other options, Michael made the ultimate sacrifice for the protection of his brother. He gave up his own dreams and asked Marlo for help. Marlo and his crew murdered Bug's father, and in return, Michael became a member of Marlo's crew. With this decision, Michael began to live his life as a criminal, in exchange for protection of his brother and a "safer" home environment for him and Bug.

***Social delinquent.*** Through my exploration of season 4, I found that the show portrayed Michael's character as a social delinquent; however, this portrayal was not one-dimensional. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, Michael engaged in criminal activity through drug dealing and committing murder. The season provided several other examples that positioned Michael as a social delinquent who exhibited anger and toughness.

*Example 1.* In episode 1, when the viewing audience first met Michael, he non-verbally demonstrated his toughness and leadership role among the boys. The first non-verbal cue of toughness was his clothing. In episode 1, Michael and Randy met Namond



on the corner, where Namond was selling drugs. All three boys had on standard Baltimore street attire--oversized white t-shirts, blue jeans or long blue jean shorts, and white sneakers or brown Timberland boots. Randy wore an oversized white polo shirt, which suggested to the viewer that Randy might be middle-class and non-threatening. Namond wore a regular oversized white t-shirt that suggested he was from the street, but it was uncertain whether he was a true threat. Michael had on a white “wife-beater” t-shirt, which is a ribbed t-shirt without sleeves. The producer’s choice to have Michael wear this type of shirt was interesting, because it conjured thoughts and images of hyper-masculinity and suggested that he was a true threat to the community.

Michael further demonstrated his toughness in the way he exuded bravado in his interaction with Namond and Randy, and how he conducted himself on the street. When Michael and Randy approached Namond, Michael had a hard scowl on his face, and he did not greet Namond. Randy and Namond greeted each other with a hand grip. As Namond and Randy began to talk, Michael immediately moves slightly away from the boys to the edge of the street and began scanning the area, as if to look out for police. His moving away demonstrated aloofness, which is a characteristic of cool pose. In this scene, through his physical appearance and mannerisms, Michael established himself as the leader of his crew, and communicated a persona of toughness and rebellion.

*Example 2.* In episode 5, Mr. Pryzbylewski gave the class a math skills sheet to complete. Mr. Pryzbylewski walked through the class to observe progress. Michael was just sitting in his seat not doing the work, so Mr. Pryzbylewski stopped to talk to Michael.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You understand the work?

(Michael readjusts in his seat as if he does not want to be bothered, and he remains silent)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Come on, this is easy. I know you can do it.

(Michael rebels through his silence and his resistance to doing the work)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You're not giving me a choice. You have detention.

The reason for Michael's aloofness with Mr. Pryzbylewski is unclear. One could assume that Michael was trying to use masking to make his classmates and teacher believe he was uninterested in school as a way of appearing cool.

*Example 3.* In a scene in episode 8, some students were in Mr. Pryzbylewski's class during lunchtime. Michael was quietly sitting at his desk with his head down. Michael was upset because his brother's father had returned from prison to be a permanent part of Michael's household. Mr. Pryzbylewski noticed that something was wrong and motioned for Michael to come to his desk.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You okay?

**Michael:** Yeah.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You sure? Something at home?

**Michael:** No.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Come on (in a whispery voice).

**Michael:** I said no!!

*Mental inferior.* I did not find that the writers portrayed Michael as mentally inferior. Michael consistently demonstrated and reinforced his intelligence on the street and in the classroom. As indicated in example 2, Mr. Pryzbylewski expressed his belief in Michael's academic capabilities. Mr. Pryzbylewski also shared his belief in Michael's abilities in episodes 7 and 9. In episode 7, Mr. Pryzbylewski taught the students probabilities using dice; and in episode 9, the students were working on measuring height and arm spans.

## Episode Seven

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Right. There's only three ways to make a four, but to make a seven...

**Michael:** Six...

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** That's good. So what should have been your play?

## Episode Nine

**Michael:** 5'9 and 3/8th?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** You got it, now hold the measure and spread your arms out to the side.

The street was a constant reinforcement of Michael's mental superiority, which helped him to maintain his male identity and confidence. Even with the accolades from the street, Michael still chose school, because he understood that even with a bad school, the chances of success were still greater than succumbing to the lure of the street. As mentioned in Michael's portrait, in episode 3, Bodie wanted Michael to continue selling drugs because he "don't rattle." Michael is able to conduct business in a smart, unwavering, fearless manner. The excerpt below demonstrates this point.

Three men approach to buy drugs. They signal Michael, using a form of sign language, to inform him of how much to give the three men. Michael goes behind the building to get the drugs from the hiding place, and he meets up with the men on a back alley to give them their drugs.

**Buyer 1:** Naw, new...I paid for three pills.

**Michael:** Look, blue shirt gets two.

**Buyer 2:** Naw, I get two.

**Michael:** White shirt gets one.

**Buyer 2:** Cheap muthafucka.

**Buyer 3:** I get four.

**Michael:** Look, blue shirt gets 2, white 1, no shirt 1. Ya'll can take what ya'll paid for and walk away or just walk away with nothin'...muthafuck a refund.

**Buyer 1:** Niggah, I paid for three!

**Michael:** You need to rethink what puttin' a hand on me is gonna get you. You can thank your friend here for snatchin' away y'all's highs. (Michael begins to walk away).

**All of the Buyers:** Yo, yo, hold up (The druggies reconsider trying to get over and ask Michael for the drugs.)

(Bodie watched the entire situation.)

Marlo Stanfield, the reigning drug kingpin, also recognized Michael's intelligence on the street. As indicated in Chapter 4, episode 5, Marlo sent his top two lieutenants, Chris and Snoop, to talk with Michael about joining their crew because they viewed him as a "soldier" and he was "straight up, [took] care of his people, and he's not beggin' for no handouts."

***Trickster.*** My exploration of season 4 revealed that Michael's character did not exhibit the characteristics of the trickster archetype. Michael was much like Dukie in this regard. Neither boy conned people to get what they wanted. Both boys were honest, and both conveyed pride, strength, and control in the face of their opponents. Like Dukie, Michael's opponent was the community, but Michael's challenge with the community was different. The community did not reject Michael. He was not an outcast. Michael was completely visible, sought after, and needed by the drug dealers, his friends, his brother, and his mother. Michael's visibility forced him to maintain a tough façade to prevent others from thinking he was weak in any way. In this regard, Michael was only a trickster in his ability to mask his inner most feelings. However, he occasionally did allow his friends to see his vulnerability. In the next three examples, I will demonstrate how he showed this vulnerability.

***Example 1.*** In episode 8, Randy, Michael, and Michael's brother were walking to school. Michael inquired about Randy being suspended from school and how to handle the police and teachers. Randy mentioned that his foster mother had placed him on restriction from leaving the house during his suspension. Michael suggested that he would like to have those kinds of restrictions placed on him. For Michael, the restrictions

represented having a parent that loved him enough, and was present enough in his life, to issue restrictions.

**Michael:** Look, I'm just sayin' you weren't suspended that long. Is it because Tiff dropped it (the girl who alleged being raped and indicated that Randy was the lookout), or because you had to do something for Ms. Donnelly?

**Randy:** Do somethin'?

**Michael:** I don't know...like promise her something.

**Randy:** Nawh, Tiff dropped it so...nothin passed that.

**Michael:** That's good. You know the thing with teachers and cops and what not, they always come at you like they got you by the ass. But you keep your mouth shut. Ain't nothin' they can do. So, more times than not, they go away.

**Randy:** I mean, it don't even matter. Ms. Anna, she got me on a short leash right now. Can't go out the house unless she know right where I'm goin'

**Michael:** *Shit, at least you got a leash.*

*Example 2.* In this example, Michael showed vulnerability by expressing his challenge with people trying to get too close to him. He had a hard time trusting people because of his abuse and neglect. In this excerpt, Michael was talking to Dukie and Randy about getting help from social services. Michael was interested because he was trying to find a way to have his mother's boyfriend removed from the household.

**Michael:** Yo Dukie, you ever call social services on your muva?

**Randy:** What?

**Michael:** I don't know, I just wanna know what happens if you call social services on somebody.

**Dukie:** You wanna report your motha?

**Michael:** She brung someone home; he won't leave.

**Randy:** You don't wanna call social services. They gets to lookin' into things, they could put you in a group home...split you and Bug up even

**Michael:** But I don't want us to leave. I just want him to leave.

**Randy:** Talkin' bout Bug's daddy ain't you?

**Dukie:** Maybe you oughta talk to a teacher about this. I mean Mr. Prezbo is real good about stuff.

**Michael:** Mr. P did say I could go talk to the school social worker.

**Randy:** Mr. Rotten Neck, he an alcoholic

**Dukie:** Oh um what about that boxing guy? Mr. Cutty.

**Michael:** (Frowning)

**Randy:** What's wrong wit' Cutty?

**Michael:** I don't know. Like he just too friendly, you know? That shit creep me out man. Like he some type of faggot or something.

**Randy:** Naw, not Cutty man. He be all up in the women. Yo don't you see how he be doin'?

**Michael:** That don't mean shit, them faggots be just like that too. And I don't know, he just too friendly you know. Everybody just too muthafuckin friendly!

(Michael storms off)

***Emergent themes.*** In my interpretation of Michael's portrayal in season 4 of *The Wire*, I found the emergent themes of *connectedness, safety, and protection*, as well as *stand tall and be a soldier*. Even though Michael portrayed the characteristics of a social delinquent, the writers did not convey these characteristics from a stereotypical perspective. Michael demonstrated characteristics of a social delinquent out of a need to protect and to be protected. He had dreams and aspiration for himself and for his brother that went beyond the street corners. Michael's cool demeanor was a way to keep all predators away so that he could achieve those dreams. He used masking and aloofness as way to keep people at a distance, out of a fear of being hurt the way he had been hurt by his mother, who was on drugs, and by her boyfriend, who sexually molested him. His demonstrations of masculinity also were the result of being the head of his household and serving as a surrogate father to his brother, as such he had to be fearless in his efforts to lead and protect his family.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, episode 3, Michael sold drugs to earn school money for him and his little brother, but once he earned enough money he quit his post, despite Bodie's effort to keep him on the crew. Michael chose school over the corner; a real social delinquent would not have made the same decision. He also committed murder in episode 13, but he committed these murders after joining Marlo's crew. He joined the crew in exchange for protection and safety for his brother. To look at Michael as a one-dimensional character would be a mistake. Michael's character evolved. He had the

basic makings of a hard-core criminal, but he also had the makings for legitimate success. Each day, Michael made a conscious decision to choose success, and it was not until circumstance challenged the possibility of Bug's success and safety, that Michael made the decision to offer himself up as a sacrifice for his brother.

**Namond Brice.** Namond was the son of Wee-Bey Brice, an imprisoned, former high-ranking member of the Barksdale Organization (the drug regime before Marlo Stanfield and his crew took over the local drug trade). Wee-Bey held legendary status on the street, and as a result, Namond received a measure of street credibility. Wee-Bey was in prison because he took "the weight for more than a dozen Barksdale organization drug killings." Wee-Bey's loyalty to the Barksdale organization kept Namond and his mother on the Barksdale payroll. Namond also worked as a drug-runner under Bodie to learn the drug trade.

The consistent flow of funds allowed Namond and his mother, De'Londa, to live a very comfortable life. They resided in a nice, fully furnished row house and his mother drove a BMW. Namond had all of the latest trends in clothing (e.g., throwback basketball jerseys, jewelry, sneakers, etc.) and technology (e.g., video games, iPod, etc.). However, circumstances threatened life as they knew it, when Avon Barksdale's sister cut off their payroll. As a result, Namond had to work harder on the street. His mother wanted him to have his own "package" (his own corner from where he could distribute drugs), so they could continue their comfortable lifestyle, and so that Namond could "stand tall" and live up to his father's example.

Namond received his own package out of Bodie's respect for Wee-Bey. Namond attempted to emulate his father on the street, but he quickly came to realize that he was

not his father; he did not have the instinct or the courage to be a hardcore criminal.

Despite Namond's attempts to portray a hard, no nonsense image, his weaknesses were evident to his friends and to Bodie. For example, episode 1 portrayed Namond as a bully through his attacks on Dukie and anyone else he felt he could dominate, but Dukie understood who Namond really was and he retaliated. The writers demonstrated this dynamic in a scene where the boys attempted to capture a homing pigeon for money; and Dukie, a few feet away, accidentally scared the pigeon away.

**Namond:** Hey man! What the fuck is wrong wit' you; throwin' bottles n' shit, huh? You just cost us cash money, you know that?

**Dukie:** Yo, I ain't done nothin'.

**Namond:** Hey you a seriously backwards dude; you know that right? Playin' wit bugs like he still in pampers.

**Dukie:** Naw, you da one that need pampers; put'em over dat mouf you got. Catch all dat shit you be flushin'.

Bodie also expressed knowledge of Namond's true character in episode 6. After Namond and De'Londa learned that they would no longer receive support from the Barksdale payroll, De'Londa took Namond to see Bodie, to demand that Bodie give Namond "a package." Bodie was reluctant.

**Bodie:** Look Namond's been...what's the word...he been inconsistent. You know sometimes he be doin good, then other times he be just...

**De'Londa:** We talked about that. He gonna do better. Ain't you!! (Looking at Namond)

**Bodie:** I don't know.

**De'Londa:** Oh I do!! You gone give this boy his own package or there gonna be some drama. You want me to talk to Wee-Bay? Maybe you wanna talk to him; I'll give you his number, he got a cellphone.

**Bodie:** All that's not even necessary. I got all the respect in the world for Bay.

**De'Londa:** Then show some for his family.

(Bodie nods his head in agreement and walks away.)

**De'Londa:** (Talking to Namond) Make me proud, hear?

(Namond gets out of the car, and his mom drives away.)



**Bodie:** Damn boy, your mom is what niggahs call a Dragon Lady.

**Namond:** She don't blink.

**Bodie:** Yeah, it gives me some insight, though.

**Namond:** To what?

**Bodie:** Why you is, what you is.

At heart, Namond was just a “fun-loving, warm-hearted kid” who wanted to make his parents, particularly his father, proud. However, the only way to do that was to follow in his father’s footsteps.

Episode 1 revealed Namond’s approach to his education. Namond worked the corner under Bodie as a drug-runner. Michael and Randy approached and asked Namond if he could get off from work to go with them. Namond approached Bodie and offered an excuse to leave his station early.

**Michael:** This corner is dead man. You still workin'?

**Randy:** Yeah cuz, we were gonna go under the bridge and catch some fresh birds.

**Namond:** I ‘on’ know; let me see if I can bounce. Hold up. (To Bodie)

Hey B, I wanted to know if I could leave early, cuz me and the fellas wanted to go to Mondamin for some back to school stuff.

**Bodie:** Whatchu need back to school stuff for? Yo ass stay suspended.

**Namond:** Come on, stop playin' B.

**Bodie:** Hey if it wasn't for social promotion, yo ass would still be in Pre-K muthafucka. Probably daycare out dis bitch.

Namond’s poor academic history and disruptive behavior had given him a seat in a special class for “corner kids.” Corner kids were children that had been abandoned by their families and raised by the streets.” More importantly, “corner kids” portrayed an out of control, disruptive, aggressive attitude, and often proved unable to be a part of a traditional classroom setting. The special class was part of a project sponsored by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County’s Sociology Department. Dr. David Parenti, a tenured professor, led the project. Dr. Parenti’s expertise lay in dealing with “youthful violent offenders.”

This special class was not an academic program. Dr. Parenti designed it to help students work through their problems, so they could re-enter the regular classroom without being disruptive. Namond initially rejected this program, but he began to flourish, make adjustments in his behavior, and show his true leadership capabilities. Through the program, Namond built a strong bond with one of the facilitators, Howard “Bunny” Colvin, who was a retired police officer. Mr. Colvin saw Namond’s potential, and recognized that Namond did not have the heart for a life of crime. Mr. Colvin eventually asked Wee-Bay for his blessing to “adopt” Namond and raise him as his own, in order to give the boy a chance at a successful life. Colvin presented his request to Wee-Bay:

**Mr. Colvin:** I mean, the West side we knew; it's dead, man. People in the game nowadays...I mean, it's a whole different breed. No code, no family, damn sure no respect. I mean, you send Namond out on them corners now; you given him 1, 2 years maybe before he down at the morgue. And maybe, if you're lucky, up here wit' you.

**Wee-Bay:** Maybe, maybe not...That's the game.

**Mr. Colvin:** I'm talkin' 'bout Namond here, Mr. Brice. He's a lot of things...a lot of good things. I mean, before you know, he might surprise all of us, given half a chance; but he ain't made for them corners, man. I mean, not like we were. That's why I come down here, cuz I gotta believe that you see it. Being who you are and all that you've been through. You know your son. It's in your hands, man.

**Wee-Bay:** You askin too much.

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, but I'm askin'.

*Social delinquent.* Through my exploration of season 4, I found that the show did portray Namond as a social delinquent. His character met every stereotype and racist characterization of Black males in virtually every episode of season 4. The last scene of season 4 suggested that Namond could remain a social delinquent, even after receiving help from Mr. Colvin.

Throughout the season, Namond's character was disruptive, angry, hostile and rebellious. He demonstrated this behavior through his dialogue, his appearance, and his mannerisms. The following examples will support this interpretation. I shared several examples in Chapter 4, but I will provide additional examples that show his disruptive behavior in school.

The first portrayal of social delinquency was through clothing. In episode 3, Namond used his clothing to present himself as hostile, tough, and rebellious. He also used his clothing as an economic class symbol. Namond was Wee-Bay's son; therefore, Namond had to uphold a tough and prosperous image. The idea of school clothes was very interesting in *The Wire*, because Tilghman Middle required students to wear uniforms. By Namond wearing expensive street clothes, in spite of the uniform, was a sign of rebellion and an attempt to convey his level of cool.

In episode 1, Namond's mother threatened not to buy him school clothes, because he had not been responsible about showing up consistently to work on the corner with Bodie. She changed her mind in episode 2, and provided Namond with a new wardrobe; complete with jeans, throwback athletic jerseys, and silver chains. Namond was surprised at her gift, and she responded, "You think my son ain't gonna go up to that school lookin' like hisself?" This exchange demonstrated that Namond's mother shaped and fueled his idea that clothing was a means to express his masculinity. To this end, in episode 3, Namond arrived at school on the first day with a football throwback jersey over his uniform shirt, a silver chain, and an earring in his ear. Ms. Donnelly, the assistant principal, addressed the issue immediately, and her comments suggested that Namond was a constant problem.

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Namond Brice...already we're startin'?

(Namond looks annoyed and begins to tuck in his chain and take off his throw back jersey and earring.)

**Namond:** (Sounding frustrated) Damn man!

**Assist. Principal Donnelly:** Next time, they stay in my drawer.

**Namond:** Yeah, whatever, man.

Namond does not adhere to Ms. Donnelly's warning. In practically every episode related to school, Namond wore an item of clothing that was against school regulations. When Namond moved to his new class, he completely refused to wear his uniform. He stated, "I ain't in my right class, so ain't no need for a uniform."

Another example of Namond's portrayal as a social delinquent occurred in episode 5. The boys were in Mr. Pryzbylewski's class working on a skill sheet. Mr. Pryzbylewski walked around the class to check on the progress of the students. He discovered that Namond had not done any work. In the middle of the class session, a student looking out of the window announced that the assistant principal was searching the school grounds, specifically the shrubs, for items not allowed in the school building. The students hid items in the shrubs during school hours and picked them up after school. When Mr. Pryzbylewski ordered the students back to their seats, Namond became hostile and disruptive.

**Student:** Yo Nate! Ms. D. shakin' bushes!

(The students rush to window)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Back to your seats...

**Namond:** Mother fuck, she got my blade, yo.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I said back to your seats!

**Namond:** Yo, Ms. D. stealin' shit. I ain't never gonna get that knife back.

(As he walks to his seat, Mr. Pryzbylewski closes the window and walks over to Namond. He looks at Namond in frustration.)

**Namond:** Yo, why you all up on me and shit. I do my work.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I'm not your "yo." Show me your work.

(Namond turns his paper over. Mr. Pryzbylewski turns it back over. It reveals that Namond has not done any work.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Yeah, I see.

**Namond:** Yo, my head hurtin' from all this learnin'. You got some Tylenol?

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** What I got for you is detention.

**Namond:** Yo, fuck you Prezbo!!! Fuckin' gimpy ass big grill muthafucka.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** That's it!!! You're out of here.

(Namond doesn't move)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Go!

(Namond begins to walk out, and Mr. Pryzbylewski gives him a pass to go to the principal's office. Namond balls up the pass and throws it on the floor.)

**Namond:** Get your police stick out your desk, so you can fuckin' beat me. You know you fuckin' want to.

(Namond walks out and runs into the Lead Teacher, Ms. Sampson, Dr. Parenti and Mr. Colvin from the University of Maryland.)

**Namond:** Fuck you lookin' at, bitch?

(The Lead Teacher is also with them, but Namond did not see her, initially. It is unclear why, but all of the students respected her more than any other teacher in the school. Once Namond saw her, he took on a more respectful demeanor.)

**Namond:** Yeah, I was just....

(Without finishing his sentence, Namond sheepishly walks off without finishing his sentence).

**Dr. Parenti:** One of the corner kids, huh?

**Mr. Colvin:** Yeah, they do step up when you need 'em, don't they?

Interestingly, after this altercation with Mr. Pryzbylewski, Namond approached him after school to apologize for his behavior. Namond revealed why he was disruptive.

(Namond, Randy and Dukie enter the room)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Why are you here? (speaking to Namond)

**Namond:** Came to say sorry. I didn't mean to get all up in your face like that.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I appreciate that, Namond. It takes courage to admit when you're wrong. What I can't understand...I've seen you in Ms. Sampson's class doing your work. Why can't you do the same in here?

**Namond:** I mean to...I do, but it just the evil get in me. Before I know it, I go off.

The next example of the portrayal of Namond as a social delinquent took place in episode 7. Namond was in his new class, and he was adapting to the rules of his new environment. Mr. Colvin had escorted Namond out of the classroom due to an outburst in class. Mr. Colvin and one of the other teachers came to talk with Namond in private, to help him calm down and understand that the class is a new learning experience. Despite their efforts, Namond retaliated.

**Mr. Colvin:** You mind if I give him a go?

**Ms. Mason:** Sure

**Namond:** Fuck you!

**Mr. Colvin:** Okay, but you still in this room.

**Namond:** Fuck you!

**Mr. Colvin:** You know, you not going back with the others 'til you learn to behave.

**Namond:** Fuck you!

**Mr. Colvin:** Until you show you can handle it, you're not going back to your regular class.

**Namond:** Fuck you!

**Mr. Colvin:** You damn sure ain't goin' home, cuz ain't no more gettin' suspended.

(Mr. Colvin begins to walk out of the room)

**Namond:** (In a respectful tone) Mr. Colvin, sir.....FUCK....You!

The final example of Namond's portrayal of social delinquency occurred in episode 1 after the four boys executed a retaliation balloon attack on the Terrace boys, who were neighboring boys that attacked Dukie. After the attack the four boys

reconvened at an ice cream truck, and Namond offered to buy ice cream for everyone except Dukie.

(Dukie, Namond and Randy are standing by the ice cream truck.)

**Dukie:** Hey yo, Namond, I'll pay you back.

**Namond:** Niggah you ain't nevah gonna have no money.

(Dukie backs up and looks down, sad, and down trodden. Michael is walking down the street to meet the boys.)

**Randy:** Yo Michael, there go you.

**Michael:** It's nothing man. Everybody made it back tho, right?

**Randy:** Naw, Marquis had to get stitches. He got hit with a brick.

**Michael** (Talking to Namond): I see you changed clothes already (Michael appears to be irritated with Namond, who shies away and turns his head.)

**Randy:** He had to; he was stinkin'.

(One of the urine balloons burst in Namond's hand when he was trying to throw one at one of the Terrace boys. This caused the fight to go in the wrong direction, and probably made Namond feel a bit embarrassed.)

**Namond:** (In an effort to deflect attention away from his embarrassing moment during the balloon attack) Yo Randy, man, that was the stupidest thing you ever thought of.

(Randy takes the insult and looks down in sadness. All the boys laugh it off. To ease the tension Namond offers to buy everyone ice cream.)

**Namond:** (To Michael) Yo, you want somethin' before he bounce? I'm buyin'...one [ice cream] for every soldier that stood tall.

**Dukie:** I was down there.

**Namond:** Man, fuck you Duke.

(Michael looks at Namond in disapproval. Namond reconsiders, pulls out a roll of bills, and gives Dukie a dollar.)

***Mental inferior.*** Through my analysis, I did not find that Namond's character displayed the traits of a mental inferior. He did not excel in school, but his performance probably resulted from his rebellious attitude, not an inability to do the work. We know from Chapter 4 that the school had suspended Namond many times, and we can infer that

the school may have socially promoted him at some point.

**Trickster.** Namond's character did exhibit the traits of a trickster, in terms of his attempt to mask his true identity. Namond was a chameleon on the street and at school. He worked very hard to be like his father, but when his mother placed greater demands on him regarding his place in the local drug trade, he could not live up to the challenge. When he had to "teach Kennard a lesson" for stealing his package, he had to confront and acknowledge his greatest fear: He was not like his father.

*Example 1.* The following excerpt is an example of Namond's façade in school. As mentioned above in episode 5, Mr. Pryzbylewski sent Namond to the principal's office because of his outburst in class. Namond returned after school to apologize.

**Namond:** Came to say sorry. I didn't mean to get all up in your face like that.

**Prez:** I appreciate that Namond. It takes courage to admit when you're wrong. What I can't understand...I've seen you in Ms. Sampson's class doing your work. Why can't you do the same in here?

**Namond:** I mean to...I do but it's just the evil get in me; before I know it, I go off.

*Example 2.* The second example demonstrates his façade on the street. It also demonstrates his breaking point and his admission to himself and others that he was not like his father. In episode 12, Namond and Michael got into an altercation, because Michael had to beat up Kennard for taking Namond's package. Namond did not have the courage to do it himself. After Michael brutally beat Kennard, Namond ran off, as he admitted, "I didn't want it, I didn't want it!" This statement revealed that he really did not want the package and was shocked that Michael had truly changed into someone he no longer knew.

The next day, Namond visited the gym, where he saw Michael and Dukie working out. In an effort to regain his masculinity after the previous day's incident,



Namond tried to bully Namond, but Michael did not allow him to revert to his usual measures to reclaim his manhood.

**Namond:** Yo, let me get that rope.

**Dukie:** I said I'm workin on it.

**Namond:** Man I said you's a Gump!!!

(Dukie looks at Namond like he's not bothered by his antics)

**Namond:** Fuckin' dog shitin, smellin' ass niggah.

(Michael pushes Namond from behind and slaps Namond with an open hand. Coach breaks up the altercation.)

**Michael:** Man fuck this!!!

(Michael leaves, and Namond begins to cry.)

**Cutty:** Yeah go on home!! Get!! Nobody want you in here no way!!

(Michael leaves and Namond has a conversation with Carver. This altercation comes on the heels of Namond leaving home after an altercation with his mother)

**Namond:** What am I gone do?

**Carver:** I'll run you home.

**Namond:** I can't go home. She expect me to be my father but I ain't him. I mean the way he is an shit. It just ain't in me.

**Coach:** What's between you and Michael?

**Namond:** Mike ain't Mike no more. He went hard on this boy last night, fucked his shit up. I can't go home. I can't.

***Emergent themes.*** Through my interpretation of Namond's portrayal in season 4 of *The Wire*, I found the emergent themes of *stand tall*, and *be a soldier* and *clothes make the man*. Namond learned to be a man through his father's example and his mother's reinforcement. Namond was committed to trying to follow in his father's footsteps and have the same hard core, hypermasculine reputation. *Standing tall*, for Namond, meant conveying masculinity, dominance, and control through the use of non-verbal cues; like physical posturing (i.e. gazing, staring, eye rolling, stance, strut) and clothing. He also

used certain types of language (i.e. slang, abusive language and cursing) to convey masculinity. His failure to carry the mantle of his father, threatened to strip Namond of his male identity. He maintained the façade of cool to retain his identity and to make his parents proud. Namond thought that if he wore the *symbols* of masculinity (e.g., clothing); he could pass as a “real” man.

**Randy Wagstaff.** Randy was an entrepreneur and an opportunist at heart, and he had his ears to the ground, meaning he paid attention to what was happening around him, and he was always aware of the latest rumors in the community. He was a good, easy-going, industrious, and well-liked kid; but he also was naïve, and his naivety got him into major trouble. Randy consistently looked for ways to make money, and he would do almost anything to make a few extra dollars. For example, he tried to capture a Homing pigeon to sell for \$300; he distributed mayoral campaign fliers for \$40; he accepted \$200 of “no-strings attached” school clothes money from a member of Marlo Stanfield’s crew; he accepted \$5 to serve as look-out while two of his male classmates, Paul and Monell, had sex with one of his female classmates in the school bathroom; and he accepted money for relaying a message to a neighborhood man, who was later murdered by a member of Marlo’s crew. Randy’s main source of income was selling candy in the neighborhood and to his classmates in school. He found creative ways to skip class to sell his goods during the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade lunch periods. Randy acquired a school uniform shirt for each grade level and changed into the proper shirt for each lunch period to avoid detection.

Randy’s primary focus was his business. It seemed that he only attended school to sell his goods and to be with his friends. In episode 5, in a conversation with

Mr. Pryzbylewski, Randy demonstrated his dedication to his business and he dispelled Mr. Pryzbylewski's understanding about the interests of some of the young Black males at Tilghman Middle:

**Mr. Pryzbylewski :** So, you're not going to be in the NBA. Then it must be the NFL?

**Randy:** Nawwhh...

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** I thought all the boys in class were gonna join the pros.

**Randy:** Naw, that's just somethin' we say.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski :** So what about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?

**Randy:** I'm gonna own my own store.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski :** That's smart. You gonna need to know a lot of math.

**Randy:** (Randy smiles and shrugs off the suggestion.)

Randy lived with his foster mother, Miss Anna. He “lost his biological mother to the streets at a young age” and he “never knew his father, but his father was an eastside corner boy who later became a major drug trafficker.” Randy grew up in “group homes, under the supervision of Maryland's Department of Social Services.” Economically, Randy represented the middle-class poor. He lived in a row house with Miss Anna. She and Randy were members of a local church, and Miss Anna had a full-time job.

Randy recognized how fortunate he was to have Miss Anna as a foster parent, and he had no desire to go back to the group home. Therefore, he worked very hard to stay out of trouble and to abide by her rules (e.g., doing homework, returning home by curfew). However, in episode 4, Randy got caught skipping class and selling candy during the 6<sup>th</sup> grade lunch period; he was sent to Assistant Principal Donnelly office. Instead of addressing the sale of candy, she accused Randy of skipping class to tag walls. She seemed to know that he did not commit the crime, but used this tactic to get Randy to inform her about who had been tagging. She threatened to call his foster mother, but

Randy pleaded with her not to call. In an act of desperation, to keep Ms. Donnelly from calling Miss Anna, he indicated that he had knowledge of a murder.

Randy told Ms. Donnelly that he delivered a message to a man that was killed. The message was for the young man to meet another individual from the street in a local park. Randy had no prior knowledge that this individual was marked for murder; he just did what he was asked to do by Lil' Kevin, who was a drug runner working on the corner with Bodie. After he delivered the message, Lil' Kevin told him to stay quiet about the incident and casually gave him money for his help. With this news, Ms. Donnelly was obligated to notify the authorities, but she first consulted with Mr. Pryzbylewski, for advice on how best to handle the situation. Mr. Pryzbylewski made a call to Sergeant Ellis Carver, one of his friends on the police force, to address the situation and to handle it discreetly; because he knew that if others found out that Randy offered any information, they would label him a snitch. In Randy's neighborhood, this label could be a death sentence.

Sgt. Carver had Randy's case handled by two pre-occupied officers, who dealt with his case very carelessly. They assumed Randy was like all of the other criminally-inclined Black males they saw every day. The news on the street quickly spread that Randy was a snitch. As a result, his peers shunned him and beat him in a schoolyard fight. Randy and Miss Anna received 24-hour police protection.

Randy got into trouble a second time in episode 6, when he was accused by one of his female classmates of being an accomplice/witness to a rape. Two male classmates asked him to serve as a lookout while they had sex with one of his female classmates in the school bathroom. Randy willingly accepted the job for payment when he saw that his

female classmate was a willing participant. Although willing at the time, his classmate later said the boys raped her and indicated that Randy was a witness. Assistant Principal Donnelly called him into her office again and questioned him about the incident. Randy tried to clear himself, but because he was already in trouble for skipping class and was looking at the possibility of being suspended or expelled for the first incident, he confirmed that the two boys, Paul and Monell, paid him to serve as a look-out and that they were in the bathroom with his female classmate.

These two incidents solidified Randy's classification as a snitch. As a result, neighborhood boys set Randy's house on fire. His foster mother suffered fatal burns and eventually died. Randy moved back into a group home and he died in a later season for being perceived as a snitch.

***Social delinquent.*** My exploration of season 4 did not reveal evidence that Randy fit the model of a social delinquent. Randy was a businessman and a salesperson. His primary goal was to make money legitimately, and he seized as many opportunities as possible to do so. Like every good salesperson, he was friendly and personable. He used his kind demeanor to sell his candy and gain trust, which helped him gain access to many opportunities. For example, in episode 3, on the first day of class, Randy entered his homeroom and professionally introduced himself to Mr. Pryzbylewski. He also helped Mr. Pryzbylewski quiet the class. His demonstration of kindness, support, and enthusiasm allowed him to seize an opportunity.

(Mr. Pryzbylewski is in the classroom getting ready for the students to arrive. The students enter the class.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Check the chart to see where you are sitting.

**Randy:** Hi, I'm Randy (Randy is smiling and extends his hand for a handshake).

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** How ya doin' Randy?

(Mr. Pryzbylewski is shaking his hand and head approvingly)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Ok, good morning (the kids are still talking and not paying attention). Ok, good morning!

**Randy:** Yo, shut up! (The class quiets.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Good Morning, I'm your homeroom teacher, obviously. My name is Mr. Pryzbelewski, but you can call me Mr. Pryzbelewski.

(No one laughed at his joke. The room was silent.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Ok, let's find out who you are.

(He is interrupted by a loud speaker announcement indicating classes will change in one minute. Mr. Pryzbylewski looks bewildered because the class just started.)

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Ok, uhhh... We'll get to know each other a little later.

(He begins to pass out bus passes but then realizes he gave them to the wrong students because the students didn't follow the seating chart as he requested. The bell rings and the students walk out with passes. He feverishly tries to get them back. He fails until Ms. Sampson, the Lead Teacher, enters the room and makes everyone return the passes).

**Randy:** Um yo, Mr. Prez, I need a hall pass for the bathroom. It's an emergency.

(The bell rings and students begin to leave)

**Randy:** Mr. Prez!

**Prez:** What?! Just take one (Distracted by his effort to get the hall passes back.)

(Randy uses the opportunity to take almost the entire stack of hall passes to sell candy during the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade lunch periods.)

***Mental inferior.*** In my exploration of season 4 of *The Wire*, I did not find that Randy's character demonstrated the traits of a mental inferior. On the contrary, he regularly demonstrated his intelligence through his ability to use his business sense to maneuver and acquire money. The two examples below illustrate this ability.

In episode 9, Randy and Dukie were surfing the internet on the class computer. They found a website that sold bulk candy, and Randy had an idea to purchase the candy from the site instead of continuing to buy it from the Korean store.

**Dukie:** You can find them cheaper on the computer, if you know what to look for.

**Randy:** Yo, this means the price I'm gettin' from the Koreans...they still markin' it up some...They gotta be...I can make twice as much using this here.

**Dukie:** You can't.

(He shows Randy that he needed to have a credit card to pay for the item. Randy looks over at Mr. Pryzbylewski, who is working with students, and smiles to himself in recognition of the plan he is about to execute. After school, Randy talks Mr. Pryzbylewski into purchasing the bulk candy for him online.)

**Randy:** We don't want your credit card number. We won't even know the number. We just need you to order the candy.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** And you have cash up front?

**Dukie:** He pay you back Mr. P. when he sell off. I mean, he gonna pay you back.

**Randy:** Yeah.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** Points on the package, huh? No way.

**Randy:** Aw, come on Mr. Prezbo. I mean, doesn't it teach us math...addition, subtraction, a quarter of a dollar, a dime, a ten, you know.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** No cash; no card.

**Randy:** Al'ight fine. Cash up front. No problem.

**Mr. Pryzbylewski:** If you come in with a wad of bills tomorrow, Randy...I wanna know where they came from. I don't want either of you out on the corner.

**Randy:** Alright.

This excerpt shows that Randy was good at math, and that he was highly motivated when it came to running his business. Randy also demonstrated his intelligence, strategic thinking, business savvy, and charm when he told Mr. Pryzbylewski that by connecting math with his interest in running his business, he would be learning math.

***Trickster.*** Randy's character displayed some of the traits of the trickster. He used his sales tactics to outsmart the school system. It is interesting that Randy did not use these tactics on the street. He may have avoided the corner because the rules and the

stakes were higher on the street. Randy's portrayal as a trickster did not align with the trickster counter trope as described by Brown and Kraehe (2011). For example, Randy outwitted the teachers by taking hall passes from Mr. Pryzbylewski, and he acquired uniforms shirts for the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade so he could skip class and sell candy during each lunch period.

In another example mentioned previously, in episode 5 Mr. Pryzbylewski asked about Randy's future aspirations and assumed that all of the young Black males wanted to play professional football or basketball. Randy responded by saying, "Naw, that's just somethin' we say." Randy's statement suggested that the boys in the class used masking to make teachers and administrators think that professional sports were their only aspiration, but in reality, they had other interests. The students may have hidden their interests due to their lack of trust in the teachers and administrators. The students also may have feared that their peers would think their future aspirations were dumb, unrealistic, or uncool.

***Emergent themes.*** Through my interpretation of Randy's portrayal in season 4 of *The Wire*, I found the emergent theme of *play it cool*. Randy displayed cool differently than Michael and Namond. Randy did not try to display his masculinity through his appearance or mannerisms. His approach was subtle. He did just enough to keep himself connected to his group and not be an outcast. He wore cornrows, oversized t-shirts, jeans, and sneakers; he talked about girls and used slang. Randy *played it cool* through his business savvy. Through his charm, he was able to gain trust, which allowed him to take advantage of opportunities in an effort to meet his entrepreneurial goals.



## Summary

The cultural messages about masculinity and academics conveyed through Dukie, Michael, Namond, and Randy in season 4 of *The Wire* are complex because the representations of the boys are multi-dimensional. The portraits of the boys revealed that the portrayal of the boys went beyond myopic representations, as further exploration of the characters revealed nuances that moved their portrayals from myopic characterizations to representations that are more positive. Historical tropes were evident in the portrayals of all the boys except Dukie, and the different dimensions of cool were also evident in the portrayal of each character. My analysis of these portrayals also revealed emergent themes, which are highlighted in the table below.

**Table 2. Relationship of Historical Tropes to Emergent Themes**

Boy	Historical Tropes	Cool Pose/Street	Emergent Themes
Dukie	N/A	N/A	Connectedness, Safety and Protection
Michael	Social Delinquent	Masculinity	Connectedness, Safety and Protection  Stand Tall and Be a Soldier
Namond	Social Delinquent	Masculinity	Stand Tall and Be a Soldier  Clothing Make the Man
Randy	Trickster	Masking	Playing It Cool

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications**

The educational standing of young Black males has become progressively worse over the last twenty years. Existing literature proposes many complex reasons for their educational challenges. Although less explored in the literature, data indicate that the media may contribute to those challenges. For example, stereotypical media images of African American male students may have a significant impact on how teachers address these students in the classroom. This study explored four African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire* to see how the show portrayed them in relation to masculinity and academics. As I have shown in Chapters 4 and 5, *The Wire* did depict the four characters in a stereotypical manner; however, non-stereotypical portrayals were also evident. In this chapter, I present conclusions and discuss how the findings related to this study can impact future research, policy, and practice.

### **Research Problem, Purpose, and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between masculinity and education, in portrayals of four African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*. My goal was to broaden the scope of educational research on African American male students. I sought to answer the following research question: What cultural messages about masculinity and academics are conveyed through four young African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*?

This topic is important because visual media's representations of African American male students could affect how members of society view and respond to these students; particularly in the school setting. In addition, this topic is important because the educational field needs more research on the impact of the media on the academic

experiences of African American male students. During the time of this study, few studies have specifically examined media portrayals of African American male students. The lack of research in this area highlights a gap in the literature and points to the importance of further research on this topic.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Brown and Kraehe's (2011) study of *The Wire* and the concept of cool pose served as the conceptual framework for this study. Brown and Kraehe focused on the limitations of *The Wire*'s use as a pedagogical tool for multicultural teacher education. To identify these limitations, they used a textual analysis to examine the show's representations of Black masculinity. They used six traditional tropes and two counter-tropes that the media historically have used to portray African American males, to compare the representations of masculinity portrayed in *The Wire*. The traditional tropes included the devoted servant, the sexual superman, the petty thief, the unhappy non-White, the social delinquent, and the mental inferior. The two counter-tropes included the trickster and the bad man. In my examination of the portrayals of four African American males in season 4 of *The Wire*, I drew conceptual guidance from Brown and Kraehe's analysis of two traditional tropes, the social delinquent and the mental inferior, and one counter-trope, the trickster. For my exploration of three dimensions of cool pose: masculinity, male identity, and masking were used. My intention was to uncover the relationships between these dimensions of cool and the historical tropes in order to comment on *The Wire*'s representation of masculinity and academics in relation to African American male student characters.

## **Research Methods**

I based my findings on my textual analysis that focused on the representation of four African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*. Using my conceptual framework as an initial guide I analyzed transcriptions of the episodes, wrote analytic memos based on within case and cross-case analysis of masculinity and academics in the portrayals of the four characters.

## **Setting of the Study**

Season 4 of *The Wire* aired from September to December 2006. It included thirteen episodes that focused mainly on Baltimore's school system and the lives of four Black teenage males. All of the boys experienced challenges that stemmed from their economic standing. Those challenges influenced their attitude, worldview, and self-image. The boys struggled to survive and continually had to rely on their masculinity to maneuver daily interactions between their families, the street, and school.

All of the boys were extremely bright. Most of them had clear dreams and aspirations, but those goals were not easy to attain. During the season, two of the boys had to make critical choices about whether they would pursue their dreams. The other two boys did not have the luxury of making a choice; life simply "happened" to them and they had to make the best of their situations. All of the boys found themselves trapped within a system that restricted them from becoming the men they were capable of being.

## **Summary of Findings**

My analysis suggests that *The Wire* offers a complex rendering of the four African American male youth portrayed in season 4. The characters are multi-dimensional and do not solely fall into stereotypical portrayals. But when "negotiating

connotated meanings” (Brown and Kraehe, 2011, p. 85), traditional tropes are evident in the character portrayals. Next, I will present a summary of findings as they relate to Brown and Kraehe’s study.

My study revealed that the four boys in season 4 were multi-dimensional characters. The study also revealed that traditional tropes were evident in the characterization of most of the boys, but the characterizations of those boys shifted into more encouraging representations. After careful exploration and analysis of the thirteen episodes in season 4 of *The Wire*, four emergent themes that reflected the context of cool pose became apparent:

- Theme 1: Stand Tall and Be a Soldier,
- Theme 2: Clothes Make the Man,
- Theme 3: Connectedness, Safety and Protection, and
- Theme 4: Playing it Cool.

Through these themes, we see how all of the boys utilized cool differently.

**Dukie: There is life in being connected.** My analysis of Dukie revealed that he did not exhibit the character traits of a social delinquent, mentally inferior, or trickster. Instead, the show portrayed him as an emasculated Black male. He was the pariah of his community because of his economic standing. As such, the individuals in his community emasculated him and stripped him of his confidence. Devoid of confidence, he did not demonstrate any dimension of masculinity outside of his need to ward off Namond’s attacks. As a neglected child and outcast, Dukie needed to feel a sense of community and connectedness. Prior to his relationship with his math teacher, Mr. Pryzbylewski, his three friends served as the sole providers of that sense of belonging. However, through

his newfound relationship with Mr. Pryzbylewski, Dukie gained confidence academically and socially, which allowed him to emerge from his shell of insecurity.

**Michael: “Standing tall” is the ultimate sacrifice.** My analysis of Michael revealed that toward the end of the season, he exhibited traits of the social delinquent, but initially, the show characterized him in a different way. Michael’s character shifted from being the good guy, with dreams and aspirations, to a bad guy with dreams and aspirations only for his brother, Bug. Namond confirmed Michael’s personality shift in episode 12, when he stated, “Mike ain’t Mike no more.” Michael sacrificed his life to ensure the safety and protection of his brother, as Michael was fearful that his brother’s father would sexually molest Bug the same way he was molested.

Prior to this threat, under his good guy persona, Michael still exhibited extreme masculinity through his demonstrations of cool in his language and mannerisms, and, to some extent, his clothing. Michael used his masculinity to reject the lure of the streets and to embrace school. However, in school, he used his masculinity as a means of protection. He understood that school was a way for him to succeed, but he also grasped that the school was part of a larger system of which he should be wary. Michael did not exhibit mental inferiority. On the contrary, his character was highly intelligent, though he demonstrated this intelligence in the street more than he did in the classroom. Michael also did not exhibit the traits of a trickster. He was not manipulative or conning. The only indication of the trickster trait was his attempt to hide his innermost feelings about the challenges he faced.

**Namond: Clothes don’t make the man.** My analysis of Namond revealed that he displayed several traits associated with the social delinquent. Many of these traits

included stereotypical characterizations of Black males. Namond was hypermasculine, rebellious, disruptive, and a bully. He sold drugs, not because he needed the money, like Michael; but because he had chosen it as his way of life. Also, unlike the other boys, Namond wore the full cloak of the street (e.g., jeans, throwback jerseys, jewelry, sneakers). The other boys, with the exception of Dukie, wore enough of the right attire to fit in; but Namond's clothing represented the pinnacle of cool. His clothes were one of the main representations of his masculinity.

Namond tried to take on the identity of his father by acting cool and wearing the symbols of cool, but he did not understand or was not willing to admit that cool came from inner strength. Namond eventually had to embrace his own identity as a man. Until he developed a bond with his teacher, Mr. Colvin, his only example of manhood was his father and other men on the street. Through Mr. Colvin, Namond began to make a subtle shift in his thinking and in his behavior. Namond slowly moved from behaving like a social delinquent to exploring the possibility of becoming something more positive.

**Randy: Every businessman plays it cool.** My analysis of Randy revealed that he was an individual who maneuvered through school and the street to achieve his goal of entrepreneurship. Randy's character existed in a more stable position than his peers. His foster mother was not on drugs, he lived in a safe environment, he felt protected, and he was well connected and well received by his community. He also did not have the same dire economic challenges as the other boys. Through the security and the provision of basic needs extended by Miss Anna, Randy's need for survival was not as great as that of his peers. Therefore, he did not have a need to display his masculinity in the same way. He could use his cool or his charm to solely to enhance his entrepreneurial pursuits.

## Conclusions

*The Wire* is fictional, but it has been praised for its realism because it goes beyond traditional television portrayals; as seen through the emergent themes. It provides well rounded representations of the characters studied and those representations are full of deep meaning and subtle messages that speak to us and move us on an emotional level.

If we were to accept the realism of *The Wire*, we could embrace several cultural messages about African American male students, masculinity, and academics. I drew ten primary messages from this study. Each of these messages aids in addressing my established research question.

**Message 1: African American male students use dimensions of masculinity for various reasons.** Even though the boys lived in the same neighborhood, they had different challenges that forced them to use varying forms of masculinity to survive. There are four key reasons why the students used masculinity: economics, acceptance, modeling, and expectations.

Through the boys, *The Wire* demonstrated how economics could dictate perceptions of Black males and the extent to which they experience acceptance in society. This acceptance can influence their male identity. The show also demonstrated the ways that the boys used masculinity to receive acceptance from family and peers, and we come to understand that the boys learn how to display masculinity from their observations of other males. *The Wire* also illustrated how masculinity can be used to meet the expectations of family and peers. In *The Wire*, all of these subtle variables played out in the classroom and on the street.



**Message 2: African American male students need to feel visible, connected, and protected to thrive academically and personally.** The boys in *The Wire* needed to feel like they had a voice. They needed a sense of connection to their peers; they needed community and family; and they needed to feel protected. All of the boys, except Randy, lived without those basic essentials; which forced them to behave and make certain decisions that proved detrimental to them. Once the boys began to feel and see a measure of these factors in their lives, changes became evident.

**Message 3: Masculinity is an important part of African American male students' identity and their daily lives inside and outside of school.** To ignore the significant role that masculinity plays in the lives of African American male students would be a mistake. *The Wire* supported the notion that hegemonic masculinity is at the core of the heterosexual Black male identity. These four characters believed that there was only one way to be a man. If they did not demonstrate masculinity according to this standard, either they felt emasculated by the system, or they experienced emasculation from the community at large. *The Wire* demonstrated that society judges a man's measure of masculinity by his money, his appearance, and his ability to demonstrate toughness.

**Message 4: Good supportive male teachers can make a difference in the lives of African American male students.** There are no easy solutions to addressing the challenges of the boys in *The Wire*. However, one clear solution presented in the show was the support provided to the boys by their male teachers. The teachers provided a new model of masculinity. They offered support, care, and concern. They exposed the boys to new experiences and new ways of thinking. They represented consistency and

reliability in the boys' lives. They also were not afraid to challenge the system to create opportunities for their students. With this type of offering, all of the boys flourished.

**Message 5: Parents play an important role in shaping African American males' perceptions of masculinity and influencing how they demonstrate this trait inside and outside of the classroom.** Each boy's family situation was different, and each boy demonstrated masculinity differently, based on the feedback he received from his parents. Namond's parents expected him to stand tall and be a soldier; because that was the only life they knew. The neglect Michael experienced from his mother forced him to stand tall and serve as the man of the house and a surrogate father to his brother. The abandonment of Dukie's mother left him emasculated, and the love and expectations of Randy's foster mother allowed him to focus less on his masculinity. *The Wire* suggested that the parental influence has a significant impact the way young Black males think and behave.

**Message 6: African American male students may change how they demonstrate masculinity based on unexpected needs or challenges.** Challenging circumstances caused Michael and Namond to shift their demonstrations of masculinity. Michael became a criminal out of a need to protect. Namond left the street out of a need to be himself. Through these two boys, *The Wire* suggests that things are not always as they appear. Extenuating circumstances, especially if they are based on economics or safety, can force African American male students to make unexpected choices that could affect them positively or negatively in the classroom and on the street.

**Message 7: African American male students are intelligent, but they may not demonstrate their intelligence in the classroom according to traditional standards.**

Through Dukie, Michael, Namond, and Randy, *The Wire* demonstrated that the African American male students were highly intelligent, but their grades did not always reflect that intelligence. However, when teachers connected their knowledge of the street to the classroom; everything began to make sense, and they were more motivated to learn.

**Message 8: African American male students do have dreams and aspirations and they want to succeed.** Through Michael and Randy, *The Wire* demonstrated that Black boys can and do have dreams and aspirations beyond the street and beyond the basketball court. Namond had goals, as well, but his parents guided his aspirations. Once his teachers exposed him to new things, his dreams changed.

**Message 9: African American male students may exhibit hypermasculinity because they are afraid.** Through Namond and Michael, *The Wire* demonstrated that tough or hostile, disruptive behavior may be the result of fear. In Michael's case, he was aloof and presented a hard demeanor, in some cases, because he had issues with trust. Namond exhibited hostility because he was afraid to be himself. He feared that if he were to reveal his true self, his peers would not consider him cool and he feared disappointing his parents.

**Message 10: African American male students' demonstration of masculinity can translate into leadership potential.** All of the boys demonstrated leadership potential through their masculinity on the street and in school. However, this potential often went unrecognized because they did not present it in a traditional manner. Michael was a leader on the street, and the community recognized him as such. Conversely, the school staff did not recognize Michael as a leader in school, in terms of serving in a recognizable role like class president. Namond eventually was able to demonstrate his

leadership ability in his special class. Randy demonstrated leadership through his ability to initiate and generate ideas like the balloon attack on the neighborhood boys, his ability to come up with new ways to earn money, and his generosity in sharing those plans with his friends so that they could make money as well. Dukie offered leadership through his knowledge of computers.

### **Discussion of Findings in Light of Existing Research**

This study produced findings that were both unique and surprising. First, the findings were in line with the current literature and discourse on African American male students. This was surprising because I did not expect this from a television show. The findings are unique because most shows do not reflect scholarly research to this extent. This alignment speaks to the research conducted by the creator, producers, and writers of the show. It also speaks to the realism of the show, which has caused it to receive accolades from television critics and the academic community.

I derived these findings from a television show with a predominantly Black male cast. As presented in the literature review, historical and contemporary portrayals of African American males on television are quite stereotypical and commonly present character portrayals that lead to negative assumptions. Season 4 of *The Wire*, through the four boys studied, transcended this common practice by portraying the characters with multiple dimensions. In many cases, the characters' portrayals shift. This shifting is representative of how real life shifts and causes changes in our thinking and our actions. Despite these types of nuances in *The Wire*, many have criticized the show for its stereotypical characterizations.

My study did not solely reveal that stereotypical portrayals were present in season 4 of *The Wire*. It did reveal that non-stereotypical portrayals were present. Before I began this study, I had little knowledge about *The Wire*. Based on the knowledge I had, I would have expected all of the characters to behave in a stereotypical manner. I assumed *The Wire* was just another way to depict Black males as gangsters, but the results of this study revealed something different. The broader discourse and research on *The Wire* also presents varying interpretations of its content; which speaks to the complexity of the show.

Brown and Kraehe's (2011) examination of *The Wire* closely relates to the research conducted in the current inquiry. They concluded that while *The Wire* does offer intricate characterizations of African American males, the show still presents Black males in a stereotypical fashion. They go on to indicate that they do not dismiss the value of using *The Wire* as a pedagogical tool, but instructors must be careful to present *The Wire* using the sociocultural knowledge needed to understand the true essence of the events in the show.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Brown and Kraehe came to their conclusion by using traditional tropes and counter –tropes to examine the portrayal of three African American male characters throughout every season of *The Wire*. As I compared my findings to the findings in the Brown and Kraehe study, I agree that there were stereotypical portrayals of African American males in *The Wire*, but I would add that the show also included non-stereotypical portrayals. I also would reiterate that these portrayals shift over the course of the season. It is important to address the presence of non-stereotypical portrayals, because *The Wire* could easily be misinterpreted or written off and categorized as

stereotypical. The danger in that is, *The Wire* offers many layers for research, and future researchers should view *The Wire* as a quality piece for exploration.

Brown and Kraehe also indicated that, if used as a pedagogic tool, instructors should not handle the depictions in *The Wire* carelessly. They should take care to contextualize the characterizations properly; otherwise, the show comes off as another dismal representation of African American males. I agree with this notion. To discuss and to use *The Wire* as a teaching tool or as a tool to increase our understanding of African American male students; one must be very careful and be mindful that the characterizations can easily be taken out of context because of a lack of understanding about the culture of the people represented in the show.

One of the reasons I chose *The Wire* for this study was because of the praise it has received for its realism. The creator of *The Wire* indicated that the show is not real; however, it draws on the lives of real people. Realistic or not, the true message of *The Wire* is rooted in the writer's approach to character development. The writers portrayed each of the four boys with intricate details that reflected real life. The portrayals of their lives were not simplistic by any means, but offered up the fullness of their circumstances. The story explained the boys' logic behind certain critical decisions, and provided a foundation that clarified where the boys acquired their views of the world and of themselves.

Taking the character development of the four roles studied, as a guide for understanding or interacting with African American male students, requires that teachers, school administrators, policy makers, etc. keep in mind that African American male students are real people who often experience complex situations that could alter the

trajectory of their lives. They are not one-dimensional and should not be viewed or treated as such. There are root causes to the challenges that some African American male students face. To look at these students or their situations from a surface level is a mistake. African American male students want to succeed like everyone else; but to do that, they need love, support, and the provision of basic needs. African American male students can be leaders, they do get scared, and every Black male is not a criminal or criminally-inclined. However, if they do not receive the support they need, they could fall into a world of criminal activity. Finally, demonstrating dimensions of masculinity is important to African American male students. To reach this population of students, teachers must give them opportunities to express themselves as young Black men, and those expressions must be respected and valued.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In light of this study and the complex educational challenges of African American male students, along with the negative impressions about young Black males (which may be due in part to how they are portrayed in the media), I have four recommendations for future research. First, I believe it is time for the African American community to look seriously at how the Black male experience is portrayed in visual media, and who controls those representations. Historical and contemporary representations of Black males have been negative and gravely inaccurate. I believe those portrayals are partially the result of not having enough African Americans, who are courageous and persistent enough to tell accurate stories of this population, as the creators, writers, and producers of these stories.

*The Wire*, is unique in that its creators, producers, and writers attempted to tell a realistic story by going beyond mainstream standards, and as a result they challenged certain stereotypes. But the question is how much did they really challenge stereotypes? How much further beyond mainstream standards did they really go? What picture does *The Wire* truly paint in an effort to have viewers believe in it? I can imagine that some viewers (critics included) watched *The Wire* and expressed how realistic the show was, but their measure of realism was based on socially constructed meanings; not based on any real-life experience. With this in mind, what would *The Wire* have looked like if it had been created, written, and produced by Black men?

Therefore, I believe the African American community, specifically Black scholars, should begin to aggressively explore how stories about the African American male experience are written. They should also explore how these stories are marketed and explore the purpose and motivation behind producing such stories. I believe this information will build awareness and motivation in education and media scholars (of color); empowering them to challenge current representations of this population through critical viewing, discussion, and teaching.

Second, this study only focused on the representations of African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*, but future research should include the exploration of the effects of these portrayals on actual African American male students. Additionally, the acquisition of feedback related to the realism of *The Wire*, from actual Black male students who live in a similar environment as the four characters studied, would be equally powerful for analysis. As unique as *The Wire* is and even though it has been praised by the academic community for the insight it provides about social life in an



urban context, I believe that as it relates to education we must put on our intellectual breaks until the voices of actual students have been heard.

Third, this study only focused on four African American male student characters in season 4 of *The Wire*, but there are other young African American male student characters, as well as teacher and administrator characters, that would serve as points of interests for future education research (i.e. Donut, Kennard, Assistant Principal Donnelly, Ms. Sanford). Donut, who may have been in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade and already an experienced car thief and Kennard, who may have only been 8 or 9 years old and exhibited characteristics of a hardened criminal. Next is Assistant Principal Donnelly, who was the assistant principal but really served as the true leader of the school due to the convenient absence of Principal Whithers, the African American male principal of Edward Tilghman Middle School. Finally, Ms. Sampson, the Lead Teacher, who all of the students respected, but there is no apparent reason for this measure of respect.

In addition, there are also other concepts that should be explored in season 4 of *The Wire*. For example, the creator of the show indicated *The Wire* is more about class, than race; therefore a full exploration of class in relation academics should be explored. Given this dissertation focuses on cool pose, future research could expand this study by focusing on the relationship between cool pose and adolescents and how those concepts play a role in the academic success and challenges of African American male students.

Finally, when I began this study, I found that very little research focused on how visual media represented Black male students. To fill the gap in the literature, the field needs more research in this area.

## **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

One can garner a substantial number of recommendations regarding policy and practice from this study; however, two main policy recommendations will provide significant results for African American male students. First, Congress should commission a committee of representatives from civil rights groups, foundations, and media reform activists to review the historical and contemporary portrayals of African American males. Based on its findings, the committee should offer media reform recommendations to Congress.

Second, the White House should establish a Council on Men and Boys, just as it has a Council on Women and Girls. The Council on Men and Boys should have a component specifically focusing on Black Men and Boys and any other ethnic group facing dire educational challenges. Much like the Council on Women and Girls, the Council on Men and Boys would work to “ensure that each of the agencies in which they are charged takes into account the needs of men and boys in the policies they draft, the programs they create, the legislation they support” (Council on Women and Girls, n.d.).

In terms of educational practice I have four recommendations. First, school systems currently struggle with identifying appropriate methods to address the needs of African American male students, therefore school systems and parent groups should partner with local organizations, like the Open Society Foundation and its Campaign for Black Male Achievement or the 2025 Black Men and Boys Campaign. These organizations are establishing creative outlets for young men of color to tell their own stories in alternative media. These organizations also work to obtain a place at the table

with policymakers to offer recommendations and best practices for how to address the myriad of challenges faced by young Black boys.

Second, this study has implications for teacher education. All four boys studied in *The Wire* were capable of learning and they were highly intelligent, but the educational system failed them because the teachers and school administrators didn't understand the students' unique learning styles. This portrayal of the boys unfortunately does reflect reality. We must ask ourselves, how is it that some young African American males can operate multi-million dollar drug cartels, but fail in school. How do we reconcile that within so many school systems, urban systems particularly; only 50% of African American males graduate from high school and disproportionate numbers of Black males are in special education?

Given education is a White female dominated field, it is particularly important for this population of teachers to be aware of how much imagery matters in the classroom, and to be mindful of and be honest about their own biases. In an effort to address these issues, school systems and schools of education (for aspiring teachers) must create safe places for teachers to express their biases in an effort to keep those biases from transferring to Black male students or any students of color. One approach to addressing this issue is through regular professional development or teacher training activities that directly address biases and stereotypes.

For example, if we were to use season 4 of *The Wire* as a pedagogical tool in schools of education for teacher candidates. The candidates would be allowed to individually and collectively explore their biases or assumptions about Black male students, and then they would be allowed to view season 4 of *The Wire*. Based on their

observations, they would journal about their viewing experience. Based on their initial biases and assumptions and the information written in their journals, the teacher candidates would have a rich foundation for honest, courageous discussion. The activity should not be limited to White female teachers, it would be powerful to look at the biases and assumptions of teachers across ethnic groups, by comparing and contrasting the biases and assumptions of each group (i.e. Do the assumptions and biases of White teachers, look different than the assumptions and biases teachers from other ethnic groups?) Beyond practice, this would also be a powerful concept for future research.

### Appendix A: Scholarly Publications about *The Wire*

Dissertations	Author	University	Date
“As true as television gets”: The Wire and perception of realism	Branden Buehler	Georgetown University	2010
Consensus Narratives on the State of Exception in American TV Shows	Young Hoon Kim	University of Alberta	2011
Creating Tragic Spectators: Rebellion and Ambiguity in World Tragedy	Christopher D. Love	University of Michigan	2009
All the Pieces Matter: A Critical Analysis of HBO’s <i>The Wire</i>	Todd Michael Sodano	Syracuse University	2008

Thesis	Author	University	Date
Rage Against the Machine: Critical Perceptions of American Democracy through Man vs. The Institution	Davin Dearth	The University of Wyoming	2009
“Can’t Knock the Hustle”: The Modernization of the Gangster Image in <i>The Wire</i>	Scott Andrew Rossow	Georgetown University	2009

Journal Articles	Author	Publication	Date
“The Game is the Game”: Tautology and Allegory in <i>The Wire</i>	Paul Allen Anderson	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2010
Is <i>The Wire</i> Too Cynical	John Atles and Peter Dreier	Dissent	Summer 2008
Constrained Frequencies: The Wire and the Limits of Listening	Adrienne Brown	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2010
In Defense of <i>The Wire</i>	Anmol Chaddha William Julius Wison Sudhir A. Venkatesh	Dissent	Summer 2008
“Way Down in the Hole”: Systemic Urban Inequality and <i>The Wire</i>	Anmol Chaddha William Julius Wilson	Critical Inquiry	Autumn 2011
The Last Rites of D’Angelo Barksdale: The Life and Afterlife of Photography in <i>The Wire</i>	Paul M. Farber	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2011
Some Last Words on <i>The Wire</i>	Christopher Hanson	Film Quarterly	Winter 2008
Walking in Someone Else’s City: <i>The Wire</i> and the Limits of Empathy	Hau Hsu	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2010
Realism and Utopia in <i>The Wire</i>	Frederic Jameson	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2010
Down in The Hole	Kent Jones	Sight and Sound	May 2008

Journal Articles	Author	Publication	Date
Capitalist Realism and Serial Form: The Fifth Season of <i>The Wire</i>	Leigh Claire La Berge	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2010
Greek Gods in Baltimore: Greek Tragedy and The Wire	Chris Love	Criticism	Summer & Fall 2011
<i>The Wire</i> : Big Brother is not Watching You in Body-more, Murdaland	Joseph Christopher Schaub	Journal of Popular Film and Television	N/A
Conversations	Jill Steans Abigail E. Ruane	International Feminist Journal of Politics	2011
The Wire for Tourists?	Ben Walters	Film Quarterly	2008

## References

- Atlas, J. & Dreire, P. (2008). Is *The Wire* too cynical?, *Dissent*, 79-83.
- Appiah, K., & Gates, H. L. (1999). *Africana: The encyclopedia of the African and African American experience*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books.
- Baynes, L. M. (2003). White out: The absence and stereotyping of people of color by the broadcast networks in prime time entertainment programming. *Arizona Law Review*, 45(293).
- Bell-Jordan, K. E. (2008). Black. White. and a survivor of the real world: Constructions of race on reality TV. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25(4), 353-372.
- Bennett, D. (2010, March 24). This will be on the midterm. You feel me? *Slate*. Retrieved from [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this\\_will\\_be\\_on\\_the\\_midterm\\_you\\_feel\\_me.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this_will_be_on_the_midterm_you_feel_me.html)
- Berg, B. (2007). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bianco, R. (2008, March 5). Too few were plugged in, but HBO's *The Wire* was electric. *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2008-03-05-the-wire\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2008-03-05-the-wire_N.htm)
- Bogle, D. (2001). *Primetime blues: African Americans on network television*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Boyd, T. (2008). *African Americans and popular culture: Theater, film, and television*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Briggs, J. (2003). Who dat man? Shaft and the blaxploitation genre. *Cineaste*, 28(2), 24-29.
- Brown, K. & Kraehe, A. (2011). Sociocultural knowledge and visual re(-) presentations of Black masculinity and community: Reading *The Wire* for critical multicultural teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14(1), 73-89.
- Buehler, B. (2010). *As true as television gets: The Wire and perceptions of realism*. (Unpublished Master's Thesis), Georgetown University, Washington, DC.



- Campaign for High School Equity. (2010, July). *CHSE offers improved graduation rates among students of color as solution to economic crisis*. Retrieved from <http://www.highschoolequity.org/media-room/news-releases/>
- Chaddha A. & Wilson, W. J. (2011). "Way down in the hole": Systemic urban inequality and *The Wire*. *Critical Inquiry*, 38(1), 164-188.
- Chaddha, A. & Wilson, W. J. (2010, September 12). Why we're teaching *The Wire* at Harvard. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/10/AR2010091002676.html>
- Chaddha, A. & Wilson, W. J. & Venkatesh, S.A. (2008). In defense of *The Wire*. *Dissent*, 83-89.
- Children's Defense Fund. (2008). *America's cradle to prison pipeline*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from [https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B\\_iDZllaSGBfMWEyYzljOWQtOGNmMS00MzYxLWFkMzAtOGViZTViN2I3MDlk/edit?pli=1](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B_iDZllaSGBfMWEyYzljOWQtOGNmMS00MzYxLWFkMzAtOGViZTViN2I3MDlk/edit?pli=1)
- Connor, M. K. (2003). *What is cool?: Understanding Black manhood in America*. Chicago, IL: Agate Publishing.
- Constantine, M. G. & Blackmon, S. M. (2002). Black adolescents' racial socialization experiences: Their relations to home, school, and peer self-esteem. *Journal of Black Studies*, 32(3), 322-335.
- Cooper, R. & Jordan, W. J. (2003). Cultural issues in comprehensive school reform. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 380-397.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cross, G. (2008). Utilizing cool posing narrative and technique as leadership strategies among underrepresented individuals. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 2(1), 32-42.
- Curtain, P. & Gaither, T.K. (2007). *International public relations: Negotiating culture, identity and power*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dance, L. J. (2002). *Tough fronts: The impact of street culture on schooling*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Dates, J. L. & Mascaro, T. A. (2005, Summer). African Americans in film and television: Twentieth-century lessons for a new millennium. *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 33(2), 50-54.

- Dearth, D. (2009). *Rage against the machine: Critical perceptions of American democracy through man vs. the institution* (Unpublished Master's Thesis). The University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.
- DeCuir-Gundy, J. T. (2009). A review of the racial identity development of African American adolescents: The role of education. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 103-124.
- Eguchi, S. (2009). Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: The rhetorical strategy of "straight-acting" among gay men. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 38(3), 193-209.
- Entman, R. M. (2006). *Young men of color in the media: Images and impacts*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute.
- Fairbanks, A. M. (2009, December 29). Deconstructing *The Wire*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/education/03wire-t.html>
- Fashola, O. S. (Ed.). (2005). *Educating African American males: Voices from the field*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Feller, B. & Hefling, K. (2012, February 9). Left behind: 10 states fleeing education. *The Hour Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.thehour.com>
- Ferguson, R. L. (2003). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 460-507.
- Finnerty, A. (2008, January 4). Wired for authenticity. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com>
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ford Foundation. (2008, December). *Momentum: Sustaining efforts to improve life outcomes among African American males*. New York, NY: Michah Gilmer, Marcus Littles & Ryan Bowers.
- Gamson, W. A., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W. & Sasson, T. (1992). Media images and the social construction of reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18, 373-393.
- Good, T. L. & McCaslin, M. (2008). What we learned about research on school reform: Considerations for practice and policy. *Teachers College Record*, 110(11), 2475-2495.

- Good, T. L. & Nichols, S. L. (2001). Expectancy effects in the classroom: A special focus on improving the reading performance of minority students in first-grade classrooms. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(2), 113-126.
- Goodman, T. (2006, September 6). Yes, HBO's *Wire* is challenging. It's also a masterpiece. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com>
- Gray, H. (1995). Black masculinity and visual culture. *Callallo*, 18(2), 401-405.
- Hall, S. (n.d). Stuart Hall and cultural studies: Decoding cultural oppression. Retrieved from <http://www.savfile.com/stuart-hall-and-cultural-studies-decoding-cultural-oppression.html>
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hall, S. (1980). Cultural studies: Two paradigms. *Media, culture and society*, 2, 57-72.
- Hallam, J. & Marshment, M. (2000). *Realism and popular cinema*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Henry, M. (2004). He is a bad mother \*\$%@!#: Shaft and contemporary Black masculinity. *African American Review*, 38(1), 119-126.
- Hinckley, D. (2008, November 13). Fans wonder if they can bond with Black 007. *NY Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.nydailynews.com>
- Holcomb, B. (2008, January 21). *The Wire*: Season five. *Slant Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/review/the-wire-season-five/59>
- Hunt, D.M. (2005). *Channeling Blackness: Studies on television and race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, J. H. (2001). *NAACP call for action in education*. (ERIC UD 035363). National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, New York, NY. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED474666.pdf>
- Jameson, F. (2010). Realism and utopia in *The Wire*. *Criticism*, 52(3), 359-372.
- Johnson, A. (2008, July 20). Behind *The Wire*: Cult classic reaches final season. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/behind-the-wire-cult-classic-reaches-final-season-872399.html>
- Johnson, V. (2005). Racism and television. In T. Boyd (Ed.), *African Americans in popular culture* (pp. 165-184). New York: Oxford University Press.

- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute. (2006). *A way out: Creating partners for our nation's prosperity by expanding life paths of young men of color*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Kim, Y.H. (2011). *Consensus narratives on the state of exception in American TV shows*. (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). University of Alberta, Edmonton, Albert, CA.
- Lambert, C. (2003, January-February). The blaxploitation era. *Harvard Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://harvardmagazine.com>
- Lincoln, Y. S. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1, 275-289.
- Love, C. D. (2009). *Creating tragic spectators: Rebellion and ambiguity in world tragedy* (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Majors, R. (2001). *Educating our black children: New directions and radical approaches*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Majors, R. G. & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York, NY; Lexington Books.
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Martin, A.C. (2008, July-August). Television media as a potential negative factor in the racial identity development of African American youth. *Academic Psychology*, 34(4), 338-342.
- Mastro, D. E., & Greenberg, B. S. (2000). The portrayal of racial minorities on prime time television. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(4), 690-703.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2006). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- McFarland, M. (2010, September 7). On TV: Quality comes down to *The Wire*. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Retrieved from <http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/tv/article/On-TV-Quality-comes-down-to-The-Wire-1213944.php>
- McKee, A. (2003). *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19931950/Textual-Analysis-a-Beginners-Guide>
- McKee, A. (2001). *A beginner's guide to textual analysis*. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/41993/>

- Mirza, H. S. (1999). Black masculinities and schooling: A Black feminist response. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(1), 137-147.
- Noguera, P. (2008). *The trouble with black boys*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Osborne, J. W. (1999). Unraveling underachievement among African American boys from an identification with academics perspective. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 68(4), 555-565.
- Patterson, O. (2006, March 26). A poverty of the mind. *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 19, 2009 from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Pieraccini, C., & Alligood, D. L. (2005). *Color television: Fifty years of African American and Latino images on prime-time television*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Poniewozik, J. (2006, January 3). Connecting the dots. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1699870,00.html>
- Rada, J.A. (2000). A new piece to the puzzle: Examining effects of television portrayals of African Americans. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(4), 704-715.
- Ricciardelli, R., Clow, K.A. & White, Philip (2010). Investigating hegemonic masculinity: Portrayals of masculinity in men's lifestyle magazines. *Sex Roles*, 63, 64-78.
- Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rose, G. (1996). Teaching visualized geographies: Towards a methodology for the interpretation of visual materials. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 20(3), 281.
- Rossow, S.A. (2009). *Can't knock the hustle: The modernization of the gangster image in The Wire* (Unpublished Master's Thesis). Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.
- Russo, A. (2010, May 11). TV: Inventing an ed school course on *The Wire*. *Scholastic*. Retrieved from <http://scholasticadministrator.typepad.com/>
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2010). *Yes we can: The Schott 50 state report on Black males and education*. Retrieved from <http://www.blackboysreport.org/>
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2009, May). *Lost opportunity: A 50 state report on the opportunity to learn in America*. Cambridge, MA: Author.

- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2008, July). *Given half a chance: The Schott 50 state report on public education for black males*. Cambridge, MA: Author.
- Shales, T. (2006, September 11). In season 4 of *The Wire*, cable that can't be touched. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/10/AR2006091001162.html>
- Sharma, A. (2011, April 29). All the pieces matter-Introductory notes on *The Wire*. *Darkmatter*. Retrieved from <http://www.darkmatter101.org>.
- Simon, D. (Producer). (2006). *The Wire* [Television series]. United States: Home Box Office.
- Stanley, A. (2008, January 6). No happy ending in Dickensian Baltimore. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Straythorne, T. L. (2008). Teacher expectations and urban black males' success in school: Implications for academic leaders. *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*, 6(2). Retrieved from [http://www.academicleadership.org/1524/teacher\\_expectations\\_and\\_urban\\_black\\_males\\_success\\_in\\_school\\_implications\\_for\\_academic\\_leaders/](http://www.academicleadership.org/1524/teacher_expectations_and_urban_black_males_success_in_school_implications_for_academic_leaders/)
- Sodano, T.M. (2008). All the pieces matter: A critical analysis of HBO's *The Wire* (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
- The Internet Movie Database. (n.d.). *Shaft*. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067741/>
- The Museum of Broadcast Communications. (n.d.) *Good Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=goodtimes>.
- The Opportunity Agenda (2011). *Opportunity for black men and boys: Public opinion, media depictions, and media consumption*. Retrieved from [http://opportunityagenda.org/files/field\\_file/2011.11.30%20%7C%20Report%20%7C%20Opportunity%20for%20Black%20Men%20and%20Boys%20%7C%20FINAL.pdf](http://opportunityagenda.org/files/field_file/2011.11.30%20%7C%20Report%20%7C%20Opportunity%20for%20Black%20Men%20and%20Boys%20%7C%20FINAL.pdf)
- Thomas, D. E., Coard, S. I., Stevenson, H. C., Bentley, K., & Zamel, P. (2009). Racial and emotional factors predicting teachers' perception of classroom behavioral maladjustment for urban African American male youth. *Psychology in the Schools*, 46(2), 184-196.

- Tuggle, A. (2011, August 27). Lessons gleaned from *The Wire*. *The league of ordinary gentlemen*. Retrieved on from <http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/blog/2011/08/27/lessons-gleaned-from-the-wire/>
- Twenty-First Century Foundation. (2006, Fall/Winter). Investing in the success of Black men and boys. *Vision News*, 9(2).
- Twenty-First Century Foundation. (2005, June). *Community returns: Investing in Black men and boys*. New York, NY: Author.
- Tyler, K. M., Boykin, A. W., & Walton, T. R. (2006). Cultural considerations in teachers' perceptions of student classroom behavior and achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(8), 998-1005.
- Tyree, J. M. (2008). *The Wire*: The complete fourth season. *Film Quarterly*, 61(3), 32-38.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Quick facts*. Retrieved from [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long\\_68176.htm](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_68176.htm)
- Ward, L. M. (2004). Wading through the stereotypes: Positive and negative associations between media use and Black adolescents' conceptions of self. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(2), 284-294.
- Wester, S. R., Vogel, D. L., Wei, M. & McLain, R. (Fall 2006). African American men, gender role conflict, and psychological distress: The role of racial identity. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 84, 419-429.
- Wohn, D.Y. (2011). Gender and race representation in casual games. *Sex Roles*, 65, 198-207.
- Wright, Y., Darko, N., Standen, P. J & Patel, T. G. (2010). Visual research methods: Using cameras to empower socially excluded Black youth. *Sociology*, 44(3), 541-558.