The purpose of this memo is to discuss and describe the process of interviewing in fieldwork, particularly as it relates to our research group question. Our question concerned the perception of opportunities of middle school African-American boys. Our observation did not produce much evidence by way of viewing what the male students perceive their opportunities to be through participation in classroom activities. The observation did assist us in choosing one of the students, Marcus. There were four African-American males in the classroom, and we chose this young man because of his proximity to the majority of the observers in the observation.

It is a challenging task to create questions that will illicit concrete answers and connections between such abstract ideas as opportunity and perception of opportunity from a seventh grader without directly asking the question. After the observation, I really started thinking about the probability that this question could actually be answered in such a short timeframe. Using interviews you can delve into the student’s thinking and reasoning, whereas you cannot do this using observational data, (Johnson, 1997, p. 289), so I felt more comfortable. However, I also still not sure how much the question could or should be changed after one sole observation.

As a researcher, we are not supposed to lead or guide the informant towards any idea pathway. Being young, we did not want to manipulate him to create our story. That is difficult to do as interviewers when we have preconceived notions of what opportunity and success might or should be. Ironically, the most effective strategy is no strategy (Fetterman, 1998, p. 46). We, however, created many strategies such as interview topics, and interviewer distribution. Since there were two interviews, the first interview was supposed to be the informational, get-to-know-you interview, and the second interview
was going to be the find-the-answers-to-the-research-question interview. We decided that it would be best if one African-American researcher was interviewing in each interview. This was in our mind to make him more comfortable, but we might have been superimposing some of our beliefs or concerns onto him. Wesley and I would conduct the first interview, and Thea and Erin would conduct the second interview. We were conducting the interview over lunch, so we bought pizza so everybody could eat together and talk. It probably is efficient not to have a strategy and then you avoid disappointment when your strategies are unsuccessful at accomplishing the desired results.

We had a list of questions that we had delegated to either the first or the second interview. In the first interview, we planned to ask a series of survey questions about his school, his classes, and his teachers. The second interview was to cover family and future. Wesley started out the interview because he said that boys are usually more comfortable with men initially than with women. I have no evidence that this is true, but in the event that it was, the harm that it might do was minimal. I am actually quite comfortable with youth, so I had little anxiety about any conversation that we might have, but I was slightly nervous about exhausting my question opportunities and or not maximizing on the probe opportunities. As Wesley asked questions, Thea and Erin were taking notes and doing observations, but I was just sitting there with no assigned task. That felt very awkward, and now I realize that I could have been making notes about his answers so that I could use the information that he had given us to probe further. As I listened to Wes ask questions, I was praying that he would not go through the whole list of questions in our first interview topics because then I might have a real struggle with my half of the interview. It appeared that after about ten minutes, Wes started looking
around the room to find things to ask. Then I realized that he was diligently trying not to
go into the questions set aside for me, and I felt more comfortable. When it was time to
transition, we broke for a minute and passed out pizza. Then I switched seats and started
asking questions. I wanted to transition as smoothly as possible into ‘important adults,’
so I picked up on the fact that he was uncomfortable calling the teachers by their first
name because it is not something that he does anywhere else. I asked about addressing
adults in school to adults outside of school and then to his parents. We started talking
about what his parents do and how he understands what they do. Then we talked about
how he thinks you pick and get a job. Then we talked about what he wants to do, and
what he thinks he needs to know in order to do it. The intent of these questions was to
find out what his experiences were and how they had influenced his ideas, but they gave
only superficial layers. The turnaround time between a question and a response felt very
long if the question was not a simple yes or no question, but it was exaggerated because
he was eating pizza, and must chew between responses. I was confident that he would
eventually answer me, but if there had been the same silence span where he had not been
cching, I probably would not have been as comfortable. All of those responses gave us
great information, but it still did not shine any light into what he believed his perception
of opportunity is.

For the second interview, we got advice about directing our focus to allow him to
build the idea of success for us. It highlighted for us that our subjectivity was focused on
one type of success or opportunity, and his developmental stage might not allow him to
express what we wanted. Thus, we had more grand tour questions and questions that
could be structural or attribute questions based on his responses (Fetterman, 1998).
These questions gave us the elements that he includes in success, and details of how he thinks you acquire them. I was very glad that I was playing observer role in this interview. We also found ourselves repeating questions or variations of the same question to make sure that it was his response and not what he thought he should say or to shed new light. This might have felt tiring to him because every time he answered, he would be countered with a ‘Really, why?’ It felt tiring to me and I was worried about him losing patience with the interview. Taking notes was eventually sort of boring and requires lots of focus and attention. You might have the urge to interrupt with a follow-up question, but I did not want the responsibility of interviewer again. Immediately following the interview, I went home to transcribe and discovered that our tape is corrupted. After much tinkering and surgery on the recording apparatus, it was not salvageable. Thus, the majority of our data come from notes and one transcribed section of the first interview. They are attached.

In conclusion, his observations of his individual success lie within the context of management of class information and drive or active participation. There are some early long-term goals, but these are probably handed down from his parents or are school mission-based. It does not yet appear that he has encountered obstacles that negatively influence his positive outlook on the possibility of attaining goals, but those goals are pretty comparable to the others in his age group. The interview was a good experience in fieldwork, but I feel like a few conversations in less contrived circumstances could have gotten similar data. The same info might have taken longer, but maybe not.
References
