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## Understanding the Impact of Special Education Programs on African American Males

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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Jacques Houssou

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Understanding the Impact of Special Education Programs on African American Males

by

Jacques Houssou

MPhil, Walden University, 2021

MBA, University of Leicester, 2004

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Public Policy and Administration

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February 2023

## Abstract

African American males placed in special education programs their entire time in high school often experience stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem as adults. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. Becker's and Lemert's labeling theory and Baumgartner and Jones's and Gould and Eldredge's punctuated equilibrium theory guided this study. The focus of the research questions was the influence of special education programs on African American males' learning experiences and the changes needed. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit 19 special education teachers, administrators, and counselors and seven African American male students. Data were collected using two researcher-developed interview guides. Based on the experts' responses, it was found that labeling results in stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards school among African American male students. Also, preconceived beliefs decrease academic expectations and reduce academic performance. The African American male students confirmed that they experienced the unintended consequences; as such, they recommended teachers' preparation and training, comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and hiring more African American teachers to mitigate the problems. The study's implication for positive social change is that the findings could help decrease the transition from school to prison for African American males placed in special education programs.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Special education includes modifying standard schooling to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Kvande et al. (2019) noted that special education included alternative teaching methods, personalized assistance, modified learning goals, and simplified curricula to promote students' learning self-efficacy and foster academic achievements. All children have a right to quality education regardless of physical or mental disabilities (Hurwitz et al., 2020). In the United States, federal law requires all public schools to identify students with special needs and provide free and appropriate public education. Consequently, numerous laws have been enacted to foster special education delivery. For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 was enacted to facilitate gifted children's identification and special instruction (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Since the enactment of IDEA, almost 95% of children with disabilities enrolled in public schools have been identified and placed in special programs (Hurwitz et al., 2020).

Special education requires commitment from all involved stakeholders, including federal and state governments, teachers, parents, administrators, and families. Hurwitz et al. (2020) observed that all stakeholders had significant roles in delivering optimal quality special education; for example, federal and state governments are required to provide adequate resources, including infrastructure, to foster special education. Additionally, teachers are expected to utilize appropriate instructional methods that meet their students' needs (Garwood et al., 2017).

On the other hand, teachers and administrators have received significant criticism regarding the inappropriate placement of minority students in special education programs. Woodson and Harris (2018) noted that African Americans constituted the most significant proportion of students in special education programs. Hispanics also face disproportionate placement in special education. For instance, Billingsley et al. (2019) noted that minorities comprised more than 47% of students in special education programs. Yet, non-Hispanic White students accounted for almost 80% of school populations (Billingsley et al., 2019). Additionally, special education programs have been identified as culturally unresponsive, undermining African American students' academic experiences.

Addressing the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education programs is anticipated to positively impact the learners' outcomes. Raufu (2017) noted that the disproportionate referral of African American students for special education and discipline has significantly influenced their school-to-prison transition. Consequently, addressing this disproportionate placement could improve African American students' academic experiences and promote positive outcomes.

This chapter provides a background of the disproportionate placement of African American males in special education programs and its impact on their learning experiences, self-esteem, and self-worth. The chapter is organized into distinct topics, including background, problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions (RQ), theoretical framework, definitions, and assumptions. Additional sections include the study's scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, and a summary.

## **Background**

African American males experience disproportionate placement in special education programs (Billingsley et al., 2019; Raufu, 2017). The disproportionate representation of African American learners in special education was identified as an issue in 1960 (H. Morgan, 2020). In their study, Ford and Russo (2016) indicated that this overrepresentation has persisted over the past 40 years. The overrepresentation of a particular cohort can manifest in various aspects, such as culturally and linguistically diverse students being over-identified for special education at the district, state, and national levels (H. Morgan, 2020). Although the racial disparity in special education has been attributed to various factors, such as a deficiency in adaptable and engaging learning environments, teachers play a significant role because they are often the first to refer learners for these services (Cooc, 2017).

It is estimated that African American students in education programs graduate from high school at lower percentages than their non-Hispanic counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). These lower graduation rates might be attributed to a mismatch between the special education programs and African American males' needs (NCES, 2020). Johnson et al. (2018) noted that a significant portion of public schools lack the appropriate structural and systemic resources to match African American males' special education needs. Although Johnson et al. did not report the numerical value, the authors noted that rural district schools were predominantly occupied by White students and had not adjusted to meet the needs of minorities settling in these communities. Consequently, rural school districts are experiencing challenges in

providing appropriate special education programming to fulfill the needs of learners with varying abilities (Johnson et al., 2018).

Billingsley et al. (2019) noted that teachers in the United States in special and general education positions are predominantly White; however, half of all learners in the nation with disabilities are of color. Specifically, Billingsley et al. estimated that less than one in every five teachers belongs to a minority race, with the percentage expected to decrease when focused on African American educators. The challenges in appropriate special education programming, coupled with the lack of adequate African American educators, increase the referral rates for special education programs, undermining the population's learning experiences (Fish, 2019; Larson et al., 2018). In addition, the placement of African American male students in special education, especially with the emotional disturbance label, could adversely impact their long-term education and life outcomes (Bal et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Although the label is supposed to help students experiencing emotional and behavioral issues with additional support, it results in unintended consequences regarding stigma, especially if the services are offered in a segregated facility (Bal et al., 2019; Banks, 2017; Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2020).

It has been identified that: (a) African American males are among the minority populations overrepresented in special education programs, (b) this disproportionality affects the population's learning experience, and (c) the increased number of teachers of color could help ameliorate the problem (Billingsley et al., 2019; Cooc, 2017; Fish, 2019; Larson et al., 2018; H. Morgan, 2020). Conversely, there is limited current literature

assessing the impact of special education on African American male students' stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem (Bal et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). This study was conducted to fill the gap in the literature regarding the influence of culturally unresponsive special education instructions on African American males' learning experiences in Broward County, Florida. In addition, the study was needed to guide incremental improvements in current special education policies to enhance African American males' experiences, especially their feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a problem in Broward County, Florida's special education program. African American males placed in special education programs their entire time in high school often experience stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem as adults (Bal et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Despite the increased advocacy for culturally responsive instruction, there is still an unintended consequence of African American males being placed in special education programs (Larson et al., 2018; H. Morgan, 2020). The unintended consequence includes significant stigma that undermines their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Bal et al., 2019; Banks, 2017; Marsh & Noguera, 2018).

This problem has negatively impacted African American males because less than 38% of the population in special education graduate from high school (L. A. Scott, 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). A significant portion of the stigma has been attributed to teachers from the dominant non-Hispanic White ethnicity, who often have low academic

expectations of African American males in special education programs (Fish, 2019). It was necessary to know if developing a culturally responsive special education instruction program in Broward County, Florida, could reduce these adverse outcomes. It was identified that a study using a qualitative methodology and a case-study design could help obtain recommendations on how Broward County School District can improve special education in high schools to minimize these unintended consequences. A study investigating how special education programs and faculty influence African American males' learning experiences helped identify solutions to the problem.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. The study was worth conducting because African American males are disproportionately placed in special education programs (Woodson & Harris, 2018). The overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs and being labeled with emotional disturbance stigmatizes these students, negatively affecting their learning outcomes (Bal et al., 2019; Banks, 2017). The impact of special education on African American males with emotional and behavioral disorders, specifically regarding self-esteem and self-worth, was unknown. Hence, conducting this doctoral study helped advance knowledge by filling the gap in the literature.



## **Research Questions**

Formulation of the RQs was guided by the gap in the literature regarding the plight of African American males placed in special education programs. The three RQs that guided the study were:

RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?

RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?

RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?

## **Theoretical Foundation**

Becker's (1963) and Lemert's (1967) labeling theory and Gould and Eldredge's (1972) and Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) punctuated equilibrium theory formed the theoretical framework for this study. Becker and Lemert, in their respective seminal

publications *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control* and *Outsiders, Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, posited that a person's behavior is influenced by the label assigned to them by society. Labeling theory's first proposition is that labeling influences an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and self-perceptions (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). Consequently, when African American male students in special education are labeled, it may result in unintended consequences that adversely affect their self-esteem and self-worth. Marsh and Noguera (2018) applied labeling theory in their qualitative study to underpin their explanation that labels result in stigma among Black students, negatively affecting their learning and self-esteem. In their study, Shifrer (2013) applied labeling theory to give their findings theoretical support, explaining that teachers and parents are likely to have lower educational expectations for labeled adolescents. Additionally, Alqahtani (2018) and Cruz and Rodl (2018) supported the theory's premise by indicating that teachers may have lower educational expectations for labeled adolescents, leading to unintended consequences that impact self-worth and esteem.

A second proposition of labeling theory is that younger individuals are more susceptible to labeling (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). Based on this proposition, African American male students referred to special education programs their entire time in high school may be more susceptible to the stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem. Labeling theory relates to this study's approach and RQ1 and RQ2 because it can be applied to understand how the labels assigned to African American males affect their self-worth and self-esteem from the administration and faculty of special education programs' perspectives. Applying the theory assisted in providing an understanding of

how being placed in special education programs affects African American male students' learning experiences (see Shifrer, 2013).

The punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972) was selected to help explain the policy changes needed to decrease labeling and unintended consequences of African American males being placed in special education programs. The theory was proposed by Gould and Eldredge (1972) to explain the policy-making process and developed further by Baumgartner and Jones (1993). The theorists noted that incidents of stability and increments characterized political processes. However, there is a lack of qualitative studies assessing the impact of special education where punctuated theory has been applied. Kuhlmann and van der Heijden (2018) explored how punctuated theory had been applied in assessing policy change, which helped identify the framework as a valid and rigorous approach.

Political processes often exhibit large-scale departures from current states. Specifically, Gould and Eldredge (1972) proposed punctuated equilibrium theory to explain policy-making in the United States. The authors noted that government policies were sometimes dramatically altered because of ongoing public discussions. However, a significant portion of government policies remains unchanged over long periods.

Punctuated equilibrium theory is comprised of two central tenets: crisis and stasis. Gould and Eldredge (1972) noted that stasis was the most prevalent phase in a significant portion of public policies. During this phase, public policies undergo small incremental modifications attributed to resistance to change. Consequently, the existing political processes tend to preserve the status quo instead of undergoing drastic changes. Gould

and Eldredge stated that revolutionary changes occur in quick punctuated bursts, often initiated and catalyzed by public crises. During these punctuated bursts, public crises unset the existing systemic inertia, prompting changes to transition to the stasis phase (Desmarais, 2019; Gould & Eldredge, 1972). Thus, the crisis phase is an opportunity to learn from new information and adjust policies to match current realities. The lack of adequate policy changes to provide culturally responsive instructions to African American males in special education programs indicates that the political process is static (Johnson et al., 2018). Based on Gould's and Eldredge's and Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) punctuated equilibrium theory, current special education policies are likely to remain unchanged until a public crisis prompts the political process to undergo a brief, punctuated phase.

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative methodology and a case study design were used in this study. Qualitative methodology was selected because it allows the collection of detailed data from the sampled participants, supports the use of interview protocols to collect in-depth information on a concept, and underpins selecting the most appropriate participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, I chose the case study design because it allowed in-depth analysis of a phenomenon by collecting data from individuals and retrieving themes from the responses, answering the RQs (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2017). Consequently, conducting a qualitative case study was anticipated to help answer the RQs and achieve the study's purpose.

I selected a qualitative methodology because it allowed me to assess and understand the meanings special education teachers, school administrators, counselors, and African American males ascribe to the influence of special education programs. Therefore, the study's target population comprised of two categories, the first was school administrators and faculty who: (a) worked in the three sampled charter high schools in Florida's Broward County School District; (b) held the position of a special education teacher, school administrator, or counselor; and (c) had experience teaching African American males in special education programs. The second category included African American males who were: (a) 18 years and older; (b) enrolled in college, university, or community college; and (c) assigned to special education classes for emotional disturbance their entire time in a charter high school in Florida's Broward County School District.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended that a sample size of 8 to 10 participants is suitable in a qualitative study where data is collected using interviews. Therefore, I utilized purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select 19 individuals in the first category who constituted special education teachers ( $n = 7$ ), administrators ( $n = 6$ ), and counselors ( $n = 6$ ). I also used purposive and snowball sampling to select seven adult African American male students ( $n = 7$ ) for the second category. The original goal was to recruit 24 individuals from the first category and eight from the second.

Data were collected using two researcher-developed interview guides. I used these instruments to conduct one-on-one sessions with the participants supporting the in-depth data collection on the impact of special education on African American males' self-

worth and low self-esteem. Each interview was expected to take approximately 30 minutes (the actual average interview times were 28.6 minutes for the experts and 29.1 minutes for the African American males). Conducting interviews with each participant allowed them to provide diverse perspectives (see Weller et al., 2018). The collected data in audio form were transcribed into separate Microsoft Word documents and sent to the respective participants for verification. After transcript verification, data were analyzed using inductive coding, categorizing similar content from the participants' responses (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). NVivo 12 (Qualitative Data Analysis International, 2023) was utilized to manage the development and analysis of themes. I conducted a thematic analysis, facilitating the identification of appropriate answers to the RQs.

The selected approach was practical because it helped explore and understand the phenomenon under study from the perspectives of special education teachers, administrators, counselors, and African American males (see Ames et al., 2019). The first phenomenon of focus from the administrators' and faculty members' perspectives was how labeling influences African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem by the end of the student's high school years. The second phenomenon was the administrators' and faculty members' perceptions of preconceived beliefs about students in the program that can contribute to the African American male's high school experience.

The phenomenon I focused on from the African American males' perspective was the changes that should be made to determine the need for assignments, academic expectations, and pedagogical approaches to minimize the potential unintended

consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth. The selected populations were relevant because the participants either had experience teaching a special education curriculum or had been enrolled in the program their entire time in high school. Additionally, the sample size of 26 respondents was appropriate for attaining data saturation and providing adequate information to address the RQs (see Vasileiou et al., 2018).

### **Definitions**

*Culturally responsive teaching:* Cultural responsiveness entails teachers' ability to establish and enforce students' academic and behavioral expectations (Gaias et al., 2019).

*Effective classroom management:* According to Garwood et al. (2017), effective classroom management entails utilizing various strategies to support appropriate behavior.

*Self-esteem:* For this study, self-esteem refers to African American males' perceptions of themselves as equal to fellow non-Hispanic White learners in the program and satisfaction with their education and overall life statuses (see Davis et al., 2017).

*Special education instructions:* The term entails compensatory functions delivered by special education teachers to foster learning among students with disabilities (Hjorne & Saljo, 2019). In addition, the instructions should provide knowledge acquisition opportunities for students who cannot learn in standard classes.

### **Assumptions**

This case study included several assumptions, including those that were ontological, epistemological, methodological, and rhetorical (see Creswell, 2018). Ontologically, I presupposed that the participants' reality was subjective, leading to

unique experiences (see Creswell, 2018). The assumption was necessary because this study's success was based on the expectation that the purposefully sampled administrators, faculty members, and African American males had unique perspectives regarding the special education program, underpinning understandability. The epistemological assumption was that my interactions with the study participants would foster an understanding of African American males' learning experience. This assumption was necessary because it supported the use of one-on-one interviews with the participants to collect enough data to understand the topic of study.

The methodological assumption entailed my presumption regarding the study's design, including data collection and analysis techniques (see Creswell, 2018). For example, I assumed that utilizing a qualitative case study was the most appropriate design. This assumption was necessary because it supported the selection of a qualitative methodology over a quantitative or mixed-methodology approach. A rhetorical assumption was that researchers are neither truth-seeking nor omniscient (Creswell, 2018). Instead, researchers report their participants' reality. Similarly, I reported African American males' reality regarding their learning experiences. This assumption was necessary because it limited my interpretation bias, ensuring that the findings were based on the participants' responses.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. Thus, the scope of the qualitative case study was two-fold. The



first was to understand and explore how special education programs and faculty contribute to African American males' learning experiences, including self-esteem and self-worth. Specifically, I focused on understanding how labeling preconceived beliefs about African American male adults in the program contributes to their experience and the unintended consequences of this stigma that undermines their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. The second was to obtain recommendations from African American males in the Broward County School District on how special education in high school can be improved to minimize the unintended consequences. The study involved recruiting and interviewing 19 special education teachers, administrators, counselors, and eight adult African American male college students.

The target population in this study was limited to school administrators and faculty who work within Florida's Broward County School District. In addition, male students of African American ethnicity who were assigned to Broward County School District's special education program the entire time they were in high school were included. A delimitation of the study was that Whites, females, and other minority students were excluded. Other minority students were excluded even though they might also be experiencing culturally unresponsive instructions because less than 38% of African American males in special education programs graduate from high school, and a significant portion of them transition from school to prison (NCES, 2020; Raufu, 2017; L. A. Scott, 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018).

This study's scholarly underpinning was based on labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) and punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould &

Eldredge, 1972), although other theories such as the social constructionism framework would have been applicable. Social constructionism is a philosophical approach focused on comprehending and promoting social change (Barbehon, 2020; Xerou et al., 2016). The theory contains alternative philosophical assumptions regarding knowledge production and reality construction. Although I considered using social constructionism as one of the frameworks in this study, it was rejected as it cannot be translated into a specific guideline because of its epistemological proposal. Also, the theory was not selected because of the scarcity of current research on its applicability in understanding the study's phenomenon (see Barbehon, 2020).

This study's transferability was achieved by including a detailed description of the participant selection process, data analysis approach, design, and methodology (see Hammarberg et al., 2016). These thick descriptions could help readers determine the findings' applicability to their context. One possible area of transferability is that the findings could be applied to improve outcomes of other minority populations in special education programs who experience similar unintended consequences (see Johnson et al., 2018).

### **Limitations**

This study's limitations were associated with the selected qualitative methodology. One limitation regarding the use of qualitative methodology is that it is considered more subjective than the mixed-methods and quantitative approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consequently, this study's findings might be limited in generalizability. The limitation was mitigated by maximizing the findings' dependability.

Dependability was achieved by performing inductive coding, which involved retrieving the themes directly from the participants' responses (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Additionally, underpinning the findings with the labeling and punctuated equilibrium theory concepts mitigated subjectivity (see Hammarberg et al., 2016). A second limitation was that data were collected from experts and African American male students in charter schools.

A third limitation of this study was that it is challenging to replicate qualitative studies (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This weakness was minimized through transferability, specifically by including a detailed description of the participants' selection, data collection, and analysis (see Hammarberg et al., 2016). A fourth limitation of the qualitative methodology was that the interpretation of the study findings was subject to bias, especially because the analysis was performed by one person (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Ensuring the study's confirmability diminished this limitation. The process involved reviewing my supervising committee's feedback, maintaining a reflective journal, and constructing an audit trail of the data analysis process (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016).

The qualitative case study was conducted by one researcher responsible for recruiting the participants, collecting the data, analyzing the transcripts, and interpreting the results. I did not have a conflict of interest to declare because I did not work within the Broward County School District or had any authority over the targeted population. In addition, I had never been in a special education program; therefore, I had no experience with the phenomenon. Conversely, as an African American male, I had a personal bias

toward the overrepresentation of Blacks in special education programs. I mitigated this bias by ensuring that: (a) the participant selection process was based on consistent inclusion-exclusion criteria, (b) the data collected and transcribed were accurate representations of the participants' responses using transcript verification, and (c) the interpreted data were congruent with published literature and verified using member checking (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016).

### **Significance**

The study has significant implications for the discipline, public administration, practice, and social change. The study's significance to the field of public administration is that it focused on a historical problem that adversely affects the functionality of the implemented policies (see Ford & Russo, 2016; H. Morgan, 2020). Specifically, the IDEA negates the disproportionality of placement of culturally, racially, or linguistically diverse students in programs (Johnson et al., 2018). Hence, the study has significance for public policy because one of the RQs focused on identifying the changes that should be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males.

This study contributed to understanding how punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972) can be utilized to understand trends in educational policies. Punctuated equilibrium theory's utilization is integral to prompt drastic policy revisions to promote inclusive special education classrooms that provide culturally responsive instructions to African American males. Also, the study

advanced the applicability of labeling theory in a special education program, with a core focus on African American male students.

The study may also have implications for special education teaching practice. Johnson et al. (2018) and Larson et al. (2018) indicated that culturally unresponsive teaching undermined African American males' learning experiences. Additionally, in the evaluated literature, it has also been highlighted that White teachers have prevailing prejudices against African American males (Fish, 2019). Consequently, this study emphasized cultural competency to promote teachers' abilities to meet African American males' needs in special education programs.

This study promotes social change regarding African American males' learning experiences by encouraging culturally responsive special education instructions. Currently, a significant portion of African American males placed in special education programs transition from school to prison, undermining their outcomes (Raufu, 2017). Consequently, providing culturally responsive special education might promote their learning experiences and boost their self-esteem and self-worth.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. The problem addressed in this study is that African American males placed in special education programs their entire time in high school often experience stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem as adults. These adverse experiences have increased school-to-prison transition rates among African

American males in special education programs (Banks, 2017; Mallett, 2017). Additionally, fewer African American males graduate from high school than non-Hispanic White learners, indicating an underlying instruction problem (Alqarni, 2016; Johnson et al., 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). There is significant literature regarding the inappropriate placement of African American males in special education programs (Billingsley et al., 2019). Causes include teacher demographics and culturally unresponsive instruction (Raufu, 2017).

Additionally, researchers have indicated that African American males have experienced negative academic expectations from their non-Hispanic teachers, undermining their learning experiences (Billingsley et al., 2019). However, there is limited literature regarding the influence of special education programs on African American males' learning experiences, including how instructions might be undermining their self-esteem and self-worth. Thus, this study was conducted to address the gap in the literature to contribute to the current body of knowledge regarding African American males' culturally responsive instruction to foster their learning experience and boost their self-worth and self-esteem. This study provided information on the incremental changes needed to develop a culturally responsive special education program in Broward County, Florida.

Chapter 2 contains a comprehensive literature synthesis regarding African American males' disproportionate placement and special education program experiences. Additionally, the chapter includes a discussion on labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) and punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould &

Eldredge, 1972) and their application in the study. A justification of the selected methodology, variables, and concepts is also provided.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

African American males placed in special education programs their entire time in high school often experience stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem as adults. The overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs and being labeled with emotional disturbance negatively affect their learning outcomes (Bal et al., 2019; Banks, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth.

According to the published literature, fewer African American males graduate from high school than other populations in the United States (Alqarni, 2016; Johnson et al., 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Also, African American male students overrepresented in special education programs are less likely to graduate from high school. African American male students fail in general and special education (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Specifically, less than 38% of African American students in special education graduate from high school (L. A. Scott, 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). However, it is not comprehensively understood if developing a culturally responsive special education instruction program in Broward County, Florida, could reduce this unintended consequence. This chapter contains four major sections: the literature search strategy, theoretical foundation, literature review related to key concepts, and summary and conclusions.



### Literature Search Strategy

A detailed literature search was conducted using Walden University Library's electronic database. The databases searched included EBSCOHost, which provides researchers access to articles published in SAGE, Elsevier, and Springer. Searches in Google Scholar were also conducted to increase the search scope. References from the retrieved articles were reviewed to identify additional articles.

The keywords used to conduct the comprehensive literature search included *African Americans, special education, male high school students, self-esteem, self-worth, dropout, performance, cultural competency, culture, racial inequality, curriculum development, and policies on special education*. The keywords were combined using the Boolean operators AND and OR to develop search phrases. The search phrases included *African Americans AND special education, African Americans AND special education AND self-esteem OR self-worth, African Americans AND special education AND male high school students, African American AND dropout AND special education, African American AND male high school students AND cultural competency or culture, African American AND curriculum development AND special education, and American AND male high school students AND policies on special education*. Articles were considered eligible for inclusion in the literature review if they: (a) were written in English, (b) were published between 2016 and 2021, and (c) were available in full text. Some of the retrieved articles were excluded from the literature review if: (a) they did not contain African Americans as a population of focus, (b) and not relevant to the topic of study.

All terms were used to search for literature on two core platforms: EBSCOHost and Google Scholar. In EBSCOHost, the search phrases *African Americans AND special education*, *African Americans AND special education AND self-esteem OR self-worth*, *African Americans AND special education AND male high school students*, *African American AND dropout AND special education*, *African American AND male high school students AND cultural competency or culture*, *African American AND curriculum development AND special education*, *American AND male high school students AND policies on special education*, and *African American AND special education AND qualitative OR qualitative methodology*, which yielded 1,134, 0, 0, 4,901, 0, 0, and 3 results respectively. The results in EBSCOHost were limited to full-text peer-reviewed journals and published between 2016 and 2021. In Google Scholar, eight search phrases yielded four, 16,800, 18,400, 17,100, 18,600, 0, and 18,500, 17,500 results, respectively. A review of the articles' titles and abstracts helped eliminate duplicates, facilitating the selection of 53 that fulfilled the inclusion criteria for those synthesized in the literature review section.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Becker's (1963) and Lemert's (1967) labeling theory and Gould and Eldredge's (1972) and Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) punctuated equilibrium theory guided the case study. Sociologists initially applied labeling theory to explain the factors that make some people act as criminals or deviants. Since its inception, the theory has been used to explain how labeling offenders, specifically those of young age who experience stigmatization for committing minor infractions, translates into a crime career (Becker,

1963; Lemert, 1967). Thus, labeling theory provides a sociologic perspective on the role of social labeling. Theorists acknowledge that although deviant behavior emanates from different conditions and causes, new issues associated with reactions to self and stigma emerge when individuals are labeled (Krohn et al., 2019).

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) developed punctuated equilibrium theory, published in their seminal work, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. The theorists borrowed the term punctuated equilibrium from a theory of modern paleontology (Gould & Eldredge, 1972). The theory was developed based on the American policy process in the empirical literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Baumgartner and Jones developed the theory because the existing theoretical frameworks were limited and only focused on stability. Conversely, stability can be impacted by a rapid and substantial policy change.

Labeling theory is based on the hypothesis that individuals are described by a behavioral characteristic that may significantly affect their behavior, beliefs, and attitudes (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). The hypothesis is relevant for this study because it can be applied to understand that the conformance of African American male students to the label of being placed in special education hinders their graduation from high school. A second hypothesis is that young individuals are more susceptible to labeling effects than adults (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). Consequently, labeling African American adolescents in special education who can be presumed to be malleable may have a significant impact on them, resulting in the unintended consequences of decreased self-worth and self-esteem (Becker, 1963; Krohn et al., 2019; Lemert, 1967).

Punctuated equilibrium theorists posit that positive and negative feedback is essential during policy change (Gould & Eldredge, 1972). Positive feedback underpins stability, while negative output supports change (Jolicoeur, 2018; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). The theory's prepositions are associated with policy image, institutional venues, attention allocation, and resistance forces (Gould & Eldredge, 1972; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). Policy image is a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals. The institutional venues are the groups or bodies in a society with authority to make decisions associated with policy issues (Gould & Eldredge, 1972; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). Policy makers use institutional venues and policy images to manipulate the core understanding of issues dealt with and influence organizations that exert jurisdiction over the concepts (Gould & Eldredge, 1972; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). Attention allocation underpins the assumption that policy makers have limited temporal and cognitive resources. Thus, attention allocation is essential during policy change (Gould & Eldredge, 1972; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018). The forces of resistance are the political systems' institutional structure that could hinder policy change (Gould & Eldredge, 1972; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018).

Although most literature where punctuated equilibrium theory has been applied focuses on the impact of social labeling on crime and deviance, the framework has been used in a public policy and administration context, focusing on education (Mulvenon et al., 2018; Pesta, 2018). For example, Pesta (2018) indicated that labeling has a significant impact, especially among ethno-racial minorities, resulting in negative outcomes that increase dropout rates. In their study, Mulvenon et al. (2018) applied the theory and

found that assigning labels to children harms their self-esteem and behavior. Further, the researchers noted that labeling harms adolescents' mindsets, especially those in special education (Mulvenon et al., 2018). Marsh and Noguera (2018) applied the labeling theory in their ethnographic study, which helped them identify that the titles resulted in stigma, affecting learning and self-esteem.

A change in education status from general to special education is a form of labeling that influences the students' academic outcomes and social confidence (Jones, 2021). There is a lack of understanding of the influence of special education programs on African American males' learning experiences. Thus, labeling theory was a suitable framework for understanding the occurrence of unintended consequences associated with African American male students conforming to the label of being placed in special programs (Mulvenon et al., 2018; Pesta, 2018).

Although the punctuated equilibrium theory has not been applied in a qualitative study assessing the impact of special education in African American males, the framework's rigor has been supported in explaining policy change (Amri & Drummond, 2020; Desmarais, 2019; & Flink, 2015). Hence, applying the theory assisted in understanding the policy changes that should be made to mitigate the unintended consequences of being placed in a special education program. Amri and Drummond (2020), Desmarais (2019), and Flink (2015) applied this theory similarly to how it was used in this study. Desmarais (2019) supported the punctuated equilibrium theory's efficacy in promoting policy change. Flink (2015) applied the theory to guide their research, which helped identify that policy feedback influences organizational changes.

Amri and Drummond found that the punctuated equilibrium theory can be applied to mitigate policy challenges, especially if the problems are complicated or time-consuming.

Punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972). was suitable to guide the implementation of this qualitative case study because it helped assess the incremental changes that should be made to develop a culturally responsive special education instruction program in Broward County, Florida. Punctuated equilibrium theory is related to this study because it helped evaluate how culturally responsive special education instruction could mitigate African American students' plight when referred to the program. Thus, the theory was concordant with the RQs. The study also advanced the theory by supporting its applicability to promote policy change for African American males in special education.

### **Literature Review of Key Concepts**

The literature review is categorized into five major sections: (a) constructs of interest, methodology, and scope of the study; (b) approaches to the problem and strengths and weakness; (c) rationale for selection of the variables or concepts; (d) studies related to the key concepts and phenomenon; and (e) review and synthesis of studies related to the RQs.

### **Constructs of Interest, Methodology, and Scope of the Study**

The qualitative case study was conducted to better understand and explore the influence of special education programs and faculty on African American males' learning experiences. Analyzing the published literature helped identify studies using a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods methodology. Qualitative studies within the scope of this

research included Banks (2017), Grace and Nelson (2019), King et al. (2019), and K. Morgan et al. (2020). Although Billingsley et al. (2019), Fish (2019), and Johnson et al. (2018) conducted studies using a quantitative methodology differing from the qualitative approach used in this research, the findings were congruent with its scope. In their mixed-methods approach, Knight-Manuel et al. (2019) mitigated the limitations of using qualitative or quantitative methodology by using a mixed-methods study; however, this was not appropriate for the current study, as the quantitative aspect would have limited its feasibility.

Grace and Nelson (2019) conducted a qualitative study to understand the role of race/ethnicity and racism in influencing the school-to-prison pipeline transition. Although the researchers used a phenomenological design, which is different from the approach used in this study, the methodology allowed for semistructured interviews to collect data. A thematic analysis of the data helped the researchers identify that race and racism significantly influenced African American males' likelihood of joining the school-to-prison system. Grace and Nelson noted that the qualitative methodology was the most appropriate approach for collecting comprehensive data through interviews, helping to understand the impact of labeling on African American male adults' education attainment. Grace and Nelson's data collection procedure and analysis approaches relate to this study because I used semistructured interviews to collect data from the participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of focus.

Like Grace and Nelson's study (2019), Banks (2017) used qualitative methodology to understand how being labeled as having a learning disability and placed

in special education influenced students' learning experiences. In the study, the researchers conducted 90 minutes of one-on-one interviews that facilitated the collection of detailed information. The researcher's methodology was congruent with the one used in this study, supporting the approach's applicability. Also, Banks supported the rigor of using open-ended interview questions in collecting data. In another study, P. L. Morgan et al. (2020) used qualitative methodology to evaluate the lived experiences of African American students in dominantly White institutions. Although different from this study—semistructured focus groups were used to collect data—the researchers supported the appropriateness of qualitative methodology in retrieving detailed information.

Similar to Banks's study (2017), Marsh and Noguera (2018) conducted a study using qualitative methodology to assess the impact of school-imposed labeling. The researchers applied labeling theory to explain how the titles resulted in stigmatization among Black males (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). The difference between the two studies was that the former was conducted using a phenomenological design, while the latter was an ethnographic study. The methodology and design allowed Marsh and Noguera to collect in-depth information using interviews and observations. The data collected were analyzed using *ATLAS.ti 7*, supporting the finding's reliability. Congruent with Banks's findings, Marsh and Noguera identified that when African American male students are labeled as struggling academically, it adversely affects their learning or schooling experience and self-esteem.

K. Morgan et al. (2020) reported that being of African American descent was associated with adverse experiences, especially the lack of belonging. The authors noted



that qualitative methodology was the most appropriate approach for the study because it allowed for exploration of the issue affecting African American students from the participants' point of view (K. Morgan et al., 2020). King et al. (2019) also used qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of gifted children. Unlike K. Morgan et al., King et al. utilized semistructured interviews to collect data. The identified themes were feeling vaguely different, feeling the same, uncomfortable difference in ok or good, feeling smarter, mature, and wanting to do more grown-up things. Specifically, the qualitative findings were that the label of gifted made them feel different from other students. In addition, the participants indicated that although the label was intended to have a positive connotation, it distinguished them from other students, reducing their sense of belonging. Even though the study was not specific to African American students, it is related to this study regarding Black male learners' experiences because of their special education label. Also, King et al. supported the appropriateness of a qualitative methodology in collecting data applicable to gain a comprehensive understanding.

Although Billingsley et al. (2019), Fish (2019), and Johnson et al. (2018) provided quantitative data analyzed using statistical tests, which supported the findings' objectivity, the results did not provide in-depth insight. Using quantitative methodology limited the researchers in gaining an extensive understanding of teacher workforce racial or ethnic composition and its' association with African American male students' special education experience. Consequently, comparing the published literature helped identify that this study's purpose could only be achieved if qualitative methodology was applied.

### **Approaches to the Problem and Strengths and Weakness**

Disproportionate referral of African American male students in special education programs is associated with adverse implications regarding their learning and overall academic performance (Alqarni, 2016; Harrison, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018; Miles, 2019). Various approaches have effectively addressed African American male overrepresentation in special education programs. These approaches include culturally relevant pedagogy, legislative or policy actions, and teachers' specific intervention. Conversely, the approaches are associated with different strengths and weaknesses are discussed in the subsequent subthemes that follow (see Alqarni, 2016; Cooc, 2017; Harrison, 2020; Kramarczuk & Tefera, 2017; Peterson, 2020; Sutton, 2020; Voulgarides et al., 2017; Waitoller & Super, 2017)

#### ***Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

Alqarni (2016) supported Johnson et al. (2018), Harrison (2020), Miles (2019), and Woodson and Harris's (2018) arguments that African American students are overrepresented in special education programs. Alqarni stated that the misuse of the special education law against African American students and the unfair classification of intellectual and literacy capacity concerning this population causes the problem. Although it was not a primary source study, Alqarni based their discussion on peer-reviewed literature. The overrepresentation of African American males in special education could be mitigated by supporting culturally responsive teaching, implementing remedial reading programs, recruiting ethnically diverse teachers, improving White teachers' cultural awareness and sensitivity, application of homogeneous referral criteria,

and increasing access to equal education (Alqarni, 2016; Chen & Lindo, 2018; Green & Stormont, 2018).

Voulgarides et al. (2017) conducted a review assessing the disproportionality in special education to provide technical solutions for mitigating systematic inequity. The researchers included studies conducted using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods methodologies. The review's strength was that it included numerous studies conducted between 2000 and 2015. Unlike Alqarni's (2016) study, Voulgarides et al. provided a systematic description of the method that supports its duplicability.

Voulgarides et al. identified that the over-representation of African Americans in special education programs is caused by a lack of cultural awareness among the teacher workforce, who are predominantly White, and ineffective referral systems. Alqarni and Voulgarides et al. supported the need to develop a culturally responsive educational system to mitigate the unintended consequences of placing African American male students in special education programs.

Knight-Manuel et al. (2019) supported Kramarczuk and Tefera's (2017) argument regarding their assessment of how teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff supported Black male students at an urban school. Using mixed-methods methodology, the researchers found that in addition to adhering to the schools' policy, a culturally relevant pedagogy enabled the teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff to improve student outcomes (Kramarczuk & Tefera, 2017).

### ***Legislative or Policy Actions***

Unlike Alqarni (2016) and Voulgarides et al. (2017), Waitoller and Super (2017) conducted a qualitative study to assess how Black and Latinx parents of students with disabilities were involved with school choice. The researchers applied a grounded theory design and collected data using interviews that allowed for an in-depth analysis of the issue. Congruent with Alqarni and Voulgarides et al., Waitoller and Super identified that the neoliberal urban educational environment restructuring caused parents to engage in politics of desperation. Concordant with Alqarni and Voulgarides et al., an additional approach for mitigating the unintended consequences of placing African Americans in special education programs is effectively implementing the IDEA. However, Kramarczuk et al. (2017) criticized the efficacy of laws and policies alone in eliminating the overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs. Consequently, there is a need for a comprehensive approach to the problem (Alqarni, 2016; Kramarczuk et al., 2017).

### ***Teachers' Specific Interventions***

In addition to the argument made by Voulgarides et al. (2017), Kramarczuk and Tefera (2017) indicated that racial disproportionality in special education is a complex issue that cannot be mitigated using only civil rights-based legislative actions. The researchers argued that mandating equity using procedural and technical approaches cannot comprehensively resolve the sociocultural problems because the strategies do not account for personal biases and racism. Rather, Kramarczuk and Tefera posited that

practitioners should comply with educational policies as well as engage their beliefs, understandings, and capacities to moderate the disproportionality.

Kramarczuk et al. (2017) sought to determine the most effective strategies for addressing disproportionality in special education programs. The researchers suggested that implementing policies such as IDEA can help mitigate disproportionality in special education. However, Kramarczuk et al. noted that the civil rights law had not eliminated the problem. As a result, other interventions presumed to be effective in addressing disproportionality could be used, including the Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multitiered Systems of Support (Kramarczuk et al., 2017).

Kramarczuk and Tefera (2017) also conducted a study to address racial disproportionality in special education programs. Like Kramarczuk et al. (2017), Kramarczuk and Tefera argued that the disproportionality of race in special education programs is associated with devastating implications in the U.S. education system. Furthermore, the researchers claimed that disparities in special education programs could be adequately addressed by encouraging teachers to consider their beliefs, capacities, and knowledge of the overrepresentation of minority students within cultural and social contexts (Kramarczuk & Tefera, 2017). Rather than focusing on the federal government's educational policies, teachers should reflect on their understanding of disproportionality in special education programs (Kramarczuk & Tefera, 2017).

Chambers (2020) argued that teachers play an important role in mitigating the overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs. In their qualitative case study, the researchers sought to explore teacher responses regarding

intervention processes to address disproportionality in enrolling African American students in special education programs. Chambers noted that compared to Whites, African Americans are more than twice as likely to receive special education services and referrals for emotional behavior disorders under IDEA. The focus of the study was the impact of RTI in reducing the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs. Findings suggested that (a) students of color are more likely to be referred to RTI programs than other student racial groups, (b) RTI referrals are subjective, (c) RTI processes can be improved by focusing on student learning and promoting parental involvement, and (d) limited time significantly hinders RTI processes (Chambers, 2020).

#### ***African American Males with Emotional and Behavioral Problems***

Cooc (2017), Peterson (2020), and Sutton (2020) supported the need to change teachers' perspectives to decrease the overrepresentation of African American male adults in special education programs. A strength of this approach is that it is a proactive technique for decreasing bias toward African American students. The weakness of the proposed solution is the varying perceptions of whether African American students are over or underrepresented in special education programs, which limits the development of a suitable strategy (Cooc, 2017; Peterson, 2020; Sutton, 2020).

#### **Rationale for Selection of the Variables or Concepts**

The concepts associated with this study are special education programs, culturally congruent special education programs, special education policies, and African American males with emotional and behavioral problems. Focusing on these concepts helped

understand special education's impact on African American male students. This section provides a discussion of the concepts assessed in this study.

### ***Special Education Programs***

Cooc and Kiru (2018), Connor (2017), and Kulkarni (2020) identified that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education indicates the prevalence of institutional racism in the United States. According to Kulkarni, the overrepresentation of students from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse programs has existed for the past several decades. Similarly, Parekh and Brown (2019) noted that special education was significantly criticized as a schooling approach. As a result, the system is vulnerable to racial, ethnic minority, disability, immigrant, and class segregation that is rationalized through a structured program (Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Craft & Howley, 2018). Moreover, student over and underrepresentation in special education is prevalent among top English-speaking nations' Indigenous populations (Cooc & Kiru, 2018).

In their study, Parekh and Brown (2019) analyzed the data of 13,272 students placed in special education. The researchers identified that the program puts students at a significant disadvantage. Students placed in special education programs experience significant disparities in accessing secondary and post-high school education. In another qualitative study, Ellis and Hartlep (2017) assessed the experiences of African American male students who stuttered. Data on the participants' life histories were collected using interviews. Analyzing the data helped the researchers identify that although stuttering influenced the students' self-identities, possessing the disability alone did not affect the

learners' performance. Rather, the students' low self-esteem and self-worth were caused by a lack of institutional tolerance and the educational environment (Ellis & Hartlep, 2017).

Cooc (2017) also suggested that teachers significantly influence the placement of students in special education programs. The researchers posited that teachers' perspectives regarding their students are among the key determinants for special education placement. In this regard, teachers who consider minority students as having learning disabilities are more likely to categorize them under the special education group. Data were collected from teacher surveys regarding their perceptions of whether they considered their students to have a disability. Findings revealed that disproportionality in special education was mainly attributed to students' background characteristics, with Hispanics, Blacks, and Native Americans being perceived as having a disability more than White students (Cooc, 2017). As a result, students from these ethnic groups were more likely to be placed in special education programs.

### ***Cultural Congruent Special Education Programs***

Congruent with Banks' (2017) findings, Marsh and Noguera (2018) identified that when African American male students are labeled as struggling academically, it adversely affects their learning or schooling experience and self-esteem. Sacks (2019) conducted a study exploring the plight of African American males in special education. Although the study was not primary research, the findings play an instrumental role in improving the understanding of the challenges faced by Blacks in public schools in the United States. Sacks observed that inappropriate placement of African American males in



special education programs contributed to poor academic achievement, leading to increased criminal cases and rates of incarceration. Sacks termed the phenomenon the school-prison pipeline, as it results in high imprisonment rates due to increased illegal behaviors among African American males. Approaches to address overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs include implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, encouraging collaboration among teachers and parents, utilizing culturally unbiased assessments, and promoting socioemotional learning (Sacks, 2019).

L. A. Scott (2018) collected data for 10 African American students in predominantly White learning institutions. The African American learners were in special education teacher programs to foster culturally inclusive learning. A thematic analysis of the data helped the researchers identify that the African American students felt alienated and supported effective monitoring from teachers of color. Similar to Sacks's study (2019), L. A. Scott supported monitoring teachers of color as a strategy for promoting the cultural congruence of special education programs.

### ***Special Education Policies***

Kanaya (2019) indicated that special education policy issues exist because there are inconsistencies in how special education decisions are made in the United States. The complex areas of intelligence tests, historical records of the conflicts associated with racial equity, and variance in federal and state policies are special education concerns that should be better understood. Kanaya argued that although determining IDEA's accuracy might not lessen the over and underrepresentation of certain populations, it could help decrease policy controversies and unintended consequences associated with the process.

Mallett (2017) conducted a study limited by the lack of primary data collection and analysis; however, they based their arguments on credible evidence. In the study, Mallett identified that students with special education disabilities are at risk of being involved in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Banks (2017) conducted a qualitative study that allowed for an in-depth analysis to determine the interdependence of racism and ableism among African American male students with learning disabilities. Applying disability critical race theory supported the findings' trustworthiness because the results were founded on scholarly evidence. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo, supporting the reliability of the findings. Banks demonstrated that although the participants perceived special education, specifically the instrumentational modifications essential and beneficial in accessing the general educational curriculum, the process could be stigmatizing. Ambiguity was found in the participants' willingness and comfort in accessing special education services and instructional accommodations. Individuals who did not receive differentiated instructions in the general setting were frustrated and coveted the experience of students who were provided with special education at a separate location (Banks, 2017).

Cormier (2021) indicated that Black male educators in special education are rare. The limited availability of Black male teachers is a problem that can be diminished through polity initiatives. Although Cormier's study was a peer-reviewed literature review, the lack of primary data limited the researchers' arguments concerning transferability. However, the researcher noted the need to mitigate the scarcity of African American male teachers. Banks (2017), Cormier, Kanaya (2019), and Mallett (2017)

found a rationale for the need to understand the problems that should be addressed to eliminate the unintentional consequences experienced by African American male students in special education programs.

### ***African American Males with Emotional and Behavioral Problems***

Peterson (2020), Cooc (2017), and Sutton (2020) suggested that teachers' perspectives regarding their abilities mainly influence the disproportionate placement of African American males in special education programs. In their study, Peterson observed that African American boys are often labeled as aggressive, as they usually exhibit emotional and behavioral problems early in their preschool years. Subsequently, their teachers often considered them suitable for referral to special education services. Teachers' implicit bias toward Black students was imminent in Peterson's study, suggesting the need for effective approaches to address issues associated with the adverse implications for student academic performance.

### **Studies Related to The Key Concepts and Phenomenon**

The phenomenon investigated was related to the unintended consequences of placing African American male students in special education programs. This study focused on understanding African American males' learning experiences, including their self-esteem and self-worth, and obtaining recommendations on minimizing unintended consequences. Assessing the published literature helped identify two core concepts: the plight of African American males in special education programs and mitigating unintended consequences.

### ***Plight of African American Male Students in Special Education Programs***

In the published literature, the plight of African American male adults in special education is well understood as researchers have indicated it results in stigmatizing feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem. Cooc (2017), Peterson (2020), and Sutton (2020) explored the plight of African American males who receive special education services. The researchers suggested that African American males with emotional and behavioral problems are disproportionately represented in the U.S. education system. According to Sutton, Black males are usually placed in restrictive special education classrooms, negatively affecting their academic outcomes. Like Connor (2017), Sutton's findings suggest that Black males are disproportionately placed in restrictive settings due to their race.

In another quantitative study, Johnson et al. (2018) conducted retrospective reviews of credible data from institutions like NCES. The data helped identify the correlation between resources and special education programs. Conversely, representing the data in numerals limited an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Unlike Fish (2019), Johnson et al. indicated that African American males are overrepresented in special education programs. A lack of adequate human, financial, and logistical resources to fulfill the increasing demand of racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students in need of special education affected program efficacy (Johnson et al., 2018).

Kincaid and Sullivan (2017) sought to determine the factors contributing to overrepresentation in special education programs. The researchers specifically investigated how student and school-level socioeconomic status influenced their chances

of being identified in the special education category and the odds of high-incidence disability identification. Findings revealed that special education placement was neither influenced by student nor school-level socioeconomic status. In contrast, being a child of a highly educated parent was negatively associated with high-incidence disability identification (Kincaid & Sullivan, 2017).

Similar to the study by Johnson et al. (2018) but different from Fish (2019) and P. L. Morgan et al. (2017), Woodson and Harris (2018) indicated that African American males are overly referred to and represented in special education programs. Woodson and Harris conducted a quantitative study, which allowed them to assess whether variance in the students' and teachers' demographics was a factor that could be used to predict referral to special education. Applying social exclusion and cultural theories provided the study with a scholarly foundation. Woodson and Harris based their findings on the theories' core concepts. Additionally, conducting statistical tests such as analyzing variance and performing multiple linear regressions helped the researchers assess the data objectively. The presentation of data in numerals has been supported to be more objective than qualitative data (Woodson & Harris, 2018).

Concordant with Fish (2019), Woodson and Harris (2018) identified that the overrepresentation of White teachers in the workforce increased the disproportionate referral of African American students to special education programs. The issue results in adverse outcomes, specifically decreased academic performance and the increased probability of learners dropping out (Woodson & Harris, 2018). These observations were consistent with Grissom et al. (2017), who associated high proportions of Black teachers

with African American student referrals for exceptionality. However, T. M. Scott et al. (2019) reported statistically nonsignificant differences in White and Black teachers' expectations and interactions with African American students.

Johnson et al. (2018) and Tefera (2019) used qualitative methodology with focus groups and 45 to 60-minute interviews that helped them collect detailed information on the topic of study. Although qualitative methodology is perceived to be more subjective than quantitative, it helped assess the perspectives and experiences of 15 African American and Latinx students with disabilities in special education programs. Like Johnson et al., Tefera identified that the lack of adequate teachers, excessive use of substitute educators, and limited resources such as access to course curricula hindered success. Also, contradictions between the special and general educational policies adversely affected the students. In other studies, Banks (2017) and Rynders (2019) found that racial identity was an additional issue for African American students in special education, making them feel that education was a burden.

Unlike Connor (2017), Sacks (2019), and Kincaid and Sullivan (2017), P. L. Morgan et al. (2020) provided contradicting findings to argue that students of color in the United States are less likely to be identified as having learning disabilities, thus, having lower odds of being categorized in special education programs. Furthermore, the researchers indicated there is minimal evidence suggesting minority overrepresentation in special education placement in the South (P. L. Morgan et al., 2020). Therefore, according to P. L. Morgan et al., more Whites are considered to have learning disabilities

than Blacks. For this reason, White students in the South are often placed in special education programs.

### ***Mitigating Unintended Consequences***

There is limited understanding of how the unintended consequences of placing African American male students in special education can be mitigated. Conversely, researchers have supported that changing federal policies, increasing diversity in the teacher workforce, and promoting social responsibility could decrease the population's overrepresentation in these programs. Billingsley et al. (2019), P. L. Morgan et al. (2018), and Smith (2020) suggested that Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and other language-minority children are overrepresented in special education. According to Billingsley et al., students benefit from a racially and ethnically representative teacher workforce. In their study, the researchers assessed the racial/ethnic composition of general and special education teachers. Billingsley et al. noted that although 47% of students in special education programs were learners of color, only 18% of teachers were of similar race/ethnicity. Similarly, Fish (2019) conducted a quantitative study that allowed them to tabulate and graphically present their data. Concordant with the findings of Billingsley et al., Fish found that the teacher population in the United States is predominantly White. Based on the evidence, Fish noted that increased diversity in the teacher workforce could decrease the underrepresentation of students of color in special education.

A similar study by Connor (2017) was conducted to determine the causes of rationalized practices in special education and the approaches that could address the issue. Thus, as opposed to Kramarczuk et al. (2017), the findings by Connor helped

identify the contributing factors to discrimination in special education practice. Although the study was not primary research, the recommended strategies may help address overrepresentation in special education programs. The suggested approaches included changing federal policies, encouraging teacher education programs, and promoting social responsibility (Connor, 2017).

### **Review and Synthesis of Studies Related to the Research Questions**

The RQs that guided this study were:

RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?

RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?

RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?



Culturally responsive special education instruction is considered an effective approach for addressing the overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs. Therefore, the themes that guided identifying relevant studies related to the RQs were administrator and faculty perceptions and experiences and culturally responsive changes.

### ***Administrator and Faculty Perception Experiences***

Williams (2018) conducted a qualitative study assessing the life histories of four female African-American teachers. The researchers wanted to understand how culturally responsive teaching impacted students. Data were collected using open-ended interview questions. The African American teachers posited that culturally responsive educational interventions were essential because they helped students believe in their brilliance, improving the learners' self-esteem and self-worth (Williams, 2018).

Similar to Williams's (2018) study, Milton-Williams and Bryan (2016) indicated that African American teachers promote culturally relevant pedagogical practices that foster academic competence and improve Black male students' consciousness. Applying the critical race theory helped the researchers assess the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on African American students' learning. Unlike Williams, Milton-Williams and Bryan assessed Black male teachers' life histories. Analysis of the data collected using semistructured in-depth interviews demonstrated that culturally responsive pedagogy could help create justice in education. Although researchers have supported the need for culturally responsive special education instructions, teachers' lack of awareness of African Americans' exclusion perpetrates the population's overrepresentation in

special education (Connor, 2017). In another study, Farinde-Wu et al. (2017) assessed seven award-winning educators' teaching practices. The interview data helped the researchers identify that culturally responsive teaching can mitigate the problems that result in the students' achievement gaps.

Othman (2018) conducted a study to assess the effect of incorporating culturally responsive instructions into special education. The researchers recruited preservice teachers who completed a pre- and postcourse survey on their views of the factors that caused the disproportionate representation of students from minority backgrounds in schools. Additionally, the participants were required to change their lesson plans to align with their culturally responsive instruction knowledge. After analyzing the data, Othman found that culturally responsive special education could improve student outcomes. Like Othman, Bottiani et al. (2018) argued that teachers lack culturally responsive practices, hindering their ability to promote an equitable learning environment. Bottiani et al. assessed eight qualitative and two quantitative studies in their systematic review and found that training significantly impacted culturally responsive practices. However, an analysis of the studies demonstrated that the research base was inadequate to develop conclusions, creating the need for more culturally responsive practices and intervention studies (Bottiani et al., 2018).

### ***Culturally Responsive Changes***

Graves et al. (2017), McCallops et al. (2019), Milton-Williams and Bryan (2016), Redding (2019), and Williams (2018) supported the need for culturally relevant school-based interventions, specifically for African American males who are disproportionately

referred to special educations' emotion and behavioral disturbance category. Graves et al. assessed the efficacy of a culturally appropriate strong start intervention on African American male students' social-emotional outcomes. Graves et al. indicated that school-based social-emotional learning interventions had been supported to help teach children coping skills to improve their social behaviors and support emotional regulation. The researchers recruited 61 African American male students randomized into the study's culturally adapted program or the standard version. Analyzing the data helped identify that the culturally adapted intervention increased the African American male students' self-regulation and self-competence. An increase in self-regulation and self-competence could help mitigate the populations' suspensions, expulsions, and overrepresentation in special education, significantly increasing students' emotion and behavioral disturbance-related issues (Graves et al., 2017).

Like Graves et al. (2017), McCallops et al. (2019) conducted an integrative review assessing the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy in programs in special education instructions, such as social-emotional learning. An analysis of 51 studies indicated that culturally responsive interventions are essential because they help promote academic achievements and enhance life outcomes (McCallops et al., 2019).

Like Graves et al. (2017), McCallops et al. (2019), Milton-Williams and Bryan (2016), Redding (2019), and Williams (2018), researchers Green and Stormont (2018) and Barrio et al. (2017) agreed that students from diverse cultural, ethnical, and racial backgrounds with disabilities are more likely to be disproportionately referred for special education services or be subjected to punitive disciplinary practices. Green and Stormont

posited that compared to diverse learners without disabilities, those with them are often overrepresented in special education programs because they have more behavioral problems. Using evidence-based practices and creating culturally responsive lessons could significantly help lessen inaccurate referrals of diverse students with disabilities for special education services (Green & Stormont, 2018). Utilizing these approaches could ensure that learners are engaged in instruction and teachers can focus on evidence-based practices designed to mitigate problem behaviors.

Barrio et al. (2017) supported the findings of Green and Stormont (2018) by suggesting that the creation of individualized educational programs can help address overrepresentation in special programs. Barrio et al. observed that individualized education programs helped to determine the frequency, type, and quality of services delivered to learners with disabilities. Through research and practice, parents and educational professionals can effectively develop key individualized educational program elements based on enhancing involvement, evaluating students' levels of functioning, improving communication, identifying related services, and writing logic goals (Barrio et al., 2017).

A review of existing literature supports the need for additional qualitative studies to understand the impact of special education on African American males' self-worth and self-esteem. Understanding the effect could facilitate the development of suitable interventions to alleviate the problem. Although the efficacy of culturally responsive teaching has been supported, there is limited evidence regarding its impact on African American students' self-esteem and self-worth, specifically those in special education.

Thus, conducting this study provided an understanding of the effect of special education on African American male students from data collected from school administrators, counselors, and special education teachers on how they could be more culturally responsive and address the issues associated with these outcomes.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Applying labeling and punctuated equilibrium theory helped to determine the incremental changes needed to develop a culturally responsive special education instruction program in Broward County, Florida (see Becker, 1963; Gould & Eldredge, 1972; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018; Lemert, 1967). Using labeling theory assisted in providing an awareness of the special education's role in the students' self-worth and perception (see Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). The application of punctuated equilibrium theory helped to understand the policy changes that should be implemented to mitigate the unintended consequences of being placed in a special education program.

Billingsley et al. (2019), Johnson et al. (2018), and Woodson and Harris (2018) argued that African American males are overrepresented in special education. The population's overrepresentation can be attributed to inadequate teachers, excessive use of substitute educators, and contradictions in special and general educational policies (Johnson et al., 2018; Tefera, 2019). In special education, African American males are unlikely to graduate and experience stigma, risking joining the school-to-prison pipeline (Banks, 2017; Mallett, 2017). Additionally, being labeled with a learning disability and referred to as a special education student adversely affects African American males' learning experience and self-esteem (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). The causes of the

overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs are well known. Although suggestions such as recruiting ethnically diverse teachers, increasing White teachers' cultural awareness, applying a homogeneous referral criterion, and effectively implementing IDEA have been suggested to mitigate the problem (Alqarni, 2016; Voulgarides et al., 2017; & Waitoller & Super, 2017), solutions from special education teachers', school administrators', and counselors' perspectives were not previously known.

This qualitative case study decreased the research gap by exploring how special education instructions might contribute to African American male students' learning experiences, including their self-esteem and self-worth. The current study extended knowledge in the discipline by collecting primary data from three core stakeholder groups: special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors. Chapter 3 contains a discussion of the study's methodology.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. This section contains a discussion of the: (a) research design and rationale, (b) role of the researcher, (c) methodology, (d) issues of trustworthiness, and (e) summary.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The current study answered the following RQs:

RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?

RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?

RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to

be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?

### **Central Concept and Phenomenon of Study**

The placement of African American male high-school students in special education programs has been associated with unintended consequences, particularly lower teacher expectations, decreased academic performance, increased probability of dropping out, and stigmatizing feelings of lack of self-worth and self-esteem (Woodson & Harris, 2018). The study's central phenomenon is cultural competency-focused curricula and what influence or contribution the lack of it in Broward County School District charter high schools has on feelings of self-worth and low esteem in African American males assigned their entire time to special education programs in high school. In the published literature, the unintended consequences have been associated with the lack of culturally responsive special education instruction, which adversely impacts African American males' learning experiences and causes (L. A. Scott, 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). In my study, the lack of culturally responsive special education instruction means pedagogy initiatives are not grounded in cultural competence (see Marsh & Noguera, 2018).

### **Research Tradition and Rationale**

The current study was conducted using qualitative methodology. A qualitative methodology was selected for four reasons (see Banks, 2017; Grace & Nelson, 2019; King et al., 2019; K. Morgan et al., 2020). First, the methodology allowed me to collect data from African American male students, special education teachers, school



administrators, and counselors in their natural settings (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Second, the methodology enabled me to collect data by interviewing participants using the developed instrument with open-ended questions (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Third, the qualitative methodology underpinned my ability to apply complex reasoning through inductive logic to retrieve themes from the participants' responses (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fourth, the methodology was suitable for answering the RQs focused on understanding the African American students', special education teachers', school administrators,' and counselors' perceptions (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, quantitative methodology to determine the causal impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable was not selected because it would not have helped answer the RQs (see Billingsley et al., 2019; Fish, 2019; & Johnson et al., 2018). Additionally, the quantitative aspect of mixed-methods methodology would have limited the approach's suitability in the study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019).

A case study design was used in this study (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although there are other designs, such as grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative research, a case study approach was selected for four reasons (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, the study's purpose was to explore a contemporary bounded system over time using multiple sources of information (see Yin, 2017). Thus, it was anticipated that the design would help me collect data from special education teachers, school administrators, counselors, and adult African American male college students on the current special education program and potential changes to improve the students'

experiences. Second, the design allows researchers to derive answers to their RQs from the collected data (Yin, 2017). Third, a case study design allows the use of interviews that support the in-depth data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fourth, other designs would not have been suitable for answering the RQs (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). For instance, a narrative research design was not selected because it requires collecting stories chronologically. The design would have been suitable if the goal was to assess the special education program's history. The grounded-theory approach was not selected because the tradition is more suitable when assessing a phenomenon that involves processes or actions that contain distinct phases that occur over time. Also, the design requires developing or discovering a theory beyond the project's scope (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethnographic research was not selected because it is suitable for analyzing shared experiences relating to a cultural group's beliefs, language, and behavior (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although a phenomenological study involves describing individuals' common meaning of a phenomenon or lived experiences, the design was not appropriate for this study because it would have limited a comprehensive understanding of the subject (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design is more suitable for describing the common phenomenon for all participants because it allows the researchers to understand it from the perspective of the individuals who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In a qualitative case study, researchers are a core data collection instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I assumed the role of an observer. My role included recruiting

the participants, creating the interview protocol, collecting and analyzing the data, and developing the final manuscript. Galdas (2017) emphasized the need to recognize and understand research bias. I did not have a conflict of interest because I did not work within the Broward County School District or have any personal or professional relationships with any participant. I had never been assigned to a special education program during my high school years, eliminating the possibility of having any preconceived perceptions or previous experiences.

As an African American male, I could have possessed personal biases about the phenomenon of interest. However, because I had no first-hand experience with enrollment as a student or teaching a special education curriculum, there was minimal influence on my objectivity during data analysis. However, the possibility of bias and the accuracy of the data collection process was promoted through self-reflection, which helped me become aware of any preconceived misunderstandings during the interviews. Additionally, researcher bias, particularly confirmation bias, was mitigated by ignoring preexisting assumptions and relying on the collected data (see Galdas, 2017). The qualitative case study was only conducted after peer-review by my committee and receiving Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted using a qualitative case study. Qualitative studies allow for a comprehensive description of the participants' selection, instrumentation, and data collection plan because it is associated with concepts of trustworthiness. This section contains a detailed discussion to support the study's replicability (see Hammarberg et al.,

2016). I chose a case study design for three reasons. The first was that the approach allowed data collection from the sampled administrators and faculty members to understand the unintended consequences of being placed in a special program. Also, the case study design supported collecting data from adult African American male college students, helping identify the solutions that could be adopted to mitigate the unintended consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2017). Second, I selected the design because it supported data collection using one-on-one interviews to gather sufficient responses to answer the RQs (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Third, I selected a case study because other approaches, such as narrative research, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology, would not have helped achieve the study's purpose and resolve the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological design would have been a suitable approach if my study's population was adult African American male college students. The aim was to understand their experience in special education programs. I considered conducting the study using a grounded theory design; however, I did not select it because it is more suitable for assessing processes and actions that require the development of a theoretical framework (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). I did not select a narrative design because the approach is relevant in cases where the focus is to assess an issue or concept that occurred chronologically. Also, I did not select an ethnographic research design because the aim was not to assess a cohort's cultural beliefs, behavior, or language (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The target population in this qualitative case study was special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors at three of the 93 charter high schools in Florida's Broward County School District (Broward Schools, 2022a). Charter high schools were selected over public high schools because the former was not subject to the student assessment and research department's research process that requires approval from the school district through an IRB process approximated to last between 10 to 12 weeks (Broward Schools, 2022b). Obtaining permission from charter high schools requires researchers to obtain permission directly from the institutions. Consequently, no permission other than approval from the charter high schools' principals was needed to post the flyer for recruiting special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors. Also, adult African American male special education students assigned to special education classes due to emotional disturbance their entire time in charter high schools in the Broward County School District were recruited. Each target population had its recruitment procedure.

### ***Special Education Teacher, School Administrator, and Counselor Selection***

Charter high schools in the Broward County School District were identified as suitable settings to recruit the participants if: (a) they were among the top three charter high schools in the county as ranked by Niche and (b) they had special education programs. An email requesting the school administrators post a recruitment flyer in the lounge, newsletter, or social media was sent (see Appendix A). I was unaware the schools had posted the flyers (see Appendix B) until the potential participants contacted me. I

assumed that two of the three sampled charter high schools would post the flyer, and at least two faculty members from each category would contact me, expressing willingness to participate in the study. As a backup, I used a snowball recruiting technique that involved requesting the purposefully sampled participants to refer their colleagues or share the flyer on their social media platforms. Purposive and snowball sampling maximized the participant selection process.

### ***African American Male Selection***

Similarly, I sent a letter of invitation (see Appendix C) to the administrator of Reddit (r/Science and r/IAmA), Facebook (African American Male Achievement, Black Men Teaching, African American Male Education Network and Development, and Black Special Education Teachers), and LinkedIn requesting their assistance by posting the recruitment tool on their page. Once permission was obtained from the administrators, I sent them the recruitment flyer (see Appendix D). The second flyer, directed toward African American males, included the study's title, purpose, eligibility, time requirements, IRB information, referral request, and my contact information. African American males were selected if they: (a) were 18 years of age and older; (b) currently enrolled in college, university, or community college; and (c) were assigned to special education classes for emotional disturbance their entire time in a charter high school in Florida's Broward County School District. As an alternative, I used snowball sampling, which allowed me to request the purposefully sampled African American male students to refer their colleagues and share the flyer on their social media platforms. Applying

both purposive and snowball sampling helped me recruit the targeted eight African American male students.

### ***Sampling Strategy and Justification.***

Snowball and purposive sampling techniques were used to select special education teachers, school administrators, counselors, and adult African American male former special education students. Purposive sampling was selected because it allowed for identification of participants who possessed unique and adequate knowledge of how special education instructions might contribute to African American male students' learning experiences, including their self-esteem and self-worth (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Etikan et al., 2016). Likewise, snowball sampling helped me recruit additional participants through referrals, specifically, special education teachers, administrators, counselors, and African American male students (see Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Qureshi, 2018). Snowball sampling was used to select 26 individuals who constituted special education teachers ( $n = 7$ ), administrators ( $n = 6$ ), counselors ( $n = 6$ ), and African American male students ( $n = 7$ ).

### ***Criteria for Participant Selection***

The experts were considered eligible to participate in the study if they: (a) worked in the three sampled charter high schools in Florida's Broward County School District, (b) held the position of a special education teacher, school administrator, or counselor; and (c) had experience teaching African American males in special education programs. In addition, the African American male students were considered eligible to participate in the study if they were: (a) 18 years of age and older, (b) enrolled in college, university, or

community college; and (c) assigned to special education classes for emotional disturbance their entire time in a charter high school in Florida's Broward County School District.

### ***How Participants Were Known to Meet the Criteria***

The participants, who included adult African American male college students, special education teachers, school administrators, or counselors, were identified as meeting the study's criteria using a screener tool (see Appendices E and F). I used the screener tool to assess the participants' eligibility. If the interested individual contacted me by email, I called them to determine whether they fulfilled all requirements. Individuals who contacted me via telephone were screened during that initial interaction. Those who met the inclusion criteria were informed they were eligible to participate and provided a consent form via email. The participants were required to type "I consent" in the consent form and to send the document back to me. Once consent was received from the participants, I called them inquiring about their availability and scheduled the Zoom interview based on their response. Experts and adult African American male students who did not fulfill the inclusion criteria were thanked for their interest and informed that they did not qualify to participate.

### ***Participant Identification, Contact, and Recruitment***

After viewing my flyer, school personnel and adult African American male college students were identified by contacting me. African American males were recruited using social media platforms. Additionally, I requested the participants who contacted me to refer their colleagues. Individuals who contacted me were provided



additional information about the study to increase their understanding, screened for eligibility, and sent the consent form after being identified as suitable participants. Only participants who consented and sent the form back to me were contacted to schedule a Zoom interview. Although the respondents' willingness to participate in the study and sacrifice was appreciated, compensation for their time participating in the Zoom interviews was not offered.

### ***Relationship Between Saturation and Sample Size***

Vasileiou et al. (2018) indicated that the sample size in qualitative studies is usually small. Although there is no consensus on the most suitable sample size for qualitative studies, researchers have provided recommendations. For example, Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended that a sample size of eight to 10 participants is adequate when data are collected using interviews. Additionally, Sim et al. (2018) recommended using rules of thumb and saturation approaches. The rule of thumb is that the sample size is usually small in qualitative studies. Also, qualitative studies using a case study design usually contain a sample size ranging between four and 30 participants (Sim et al., 2018). The saturation approach involved recruiting participants to the point where additional interviews did not result in additional data. Therefore, 26 individuals who included special education teachers ( $n = 7$ ), administrators ( $n = 6$ ), counselors ( $n = 6$ ), and adult African American male students ( $n = 7$ ) were selected using the rule of thumb approach. Data saturation was achieved with 26 participants.

## **Instrumentation**

The study had two data collection instruments. The first consisted of eight semistructured interview questions to collect data from the experts: special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors (see Appendix G). The instrument helped me obtain data to answer the first and second RQs. The second data collection instrument (Appendix H) consisted of eight semistructured interview questions to collect data from adult African American male students. The instrument helped obtain data to answer the third RQ by focusing on changes in the program's assignment, academic expectations, and pedagogical approaches. Historical or legal documents were not used as sources of data. Only data from the interview responses from special education teachers, administrators, counselors, and adult African American male students were used.

### ***Source for Each Data Collection Instrument: Researcher Produced***

The decision to use the researcher-produced semistructured interview guide with open-ended questions was based on recommendations from existing literature. Specifically, Alqarni (2016), Cooc and Kiru (2018), Johnson et al. (2018), Harrison (2020), Kulkarni (2020), Marsh and Noguera (2018), Sutton (2020), and Voulgarides et al. (2017) supported the suitability of semistructured interview guides in collecting in-depth data on a phenomenon of focus. In addition, the source of the data collection instruments' content and design was based on key concepts, such as labeling, the plight of African American males in special education programs, and unintended consequences discussed in the literature and theoretical framework tenets.

### ***Sufficiency of the Data Collection Instruments***

The open-ended interview questions helped me collect adequate information for answering the RQs because the queries allowed the respondents to describe their lived experiences regarding the impact of special education on African American males. In the published literature, semistructured interview protocols were supported as adequate instruments for collecting in-depth data (Banks, 2017; Grace & Nelson, 2019; King et al., 2019; K. Morgan et al., 2020). Also, the developed interview protocols were derived from the key concepts discussed in the literature review and categorized according to the respective RQs (see Alqarni, 2016; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Harrison, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018; Kulkarni, 2020; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Sutton, 2020; & Voulgarides et al., 2017). Additionally, the data collection instruments were adequate because they were specific to the two population cohorts and RQs (see Table 1). Specifically, the first instrument helped me collect data from the special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors to answer the first and second RQs. The second instrument was used to obtain responses from adult African American male college students assigned to a special program because of emotional disturbance their entire time in high school, helping answer the third RQ.

### **Researcher-Developed Instrument**

The two interview protocols were developed based on key concepts identified in Chapter 2. Specifically, the content of the interview guides was based on labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) and punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972). The questions addressed the theories' tenets of labeling

and preconceived beliefs that have been found to influence the image of self and stigma (Krohn et al., 2019; Mulvenon et al., 2018). The key concepts included a requirement to seek answers to questions related to culturally relevant pedagogy, legislative or policy actions, teachers' specific interventions, and African American males with emotional and behavioral problems. In the expert's interview guide, the first four questions were designed to help collect data to answer the first RQ and were developed from labeling theory's preposition that beliefs and attitudes influence behavior (see Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). Another learning theory preposition underpinning the interview questions was that young individuals are more susceptible to labeling than adults. Also, the concept of African American males with behavioral problems was used in formulating the first four interview questions (see Cooc, 2017; Peterson, 2020; Sutton, 2020). The second RQ was based on the key concepts of preconceived beliefs, culturally relevant pedagogy, and teachers' specific interventions. Data from the experts was used to answer the first two RQs. The third RQ was based on the concept of legislative or policy actions, culturally relevant pedagogy, and learning theory's preposition that feedback is essential during policy change (see Jolicoeur, 2018; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018).

#### ***Establishment of Content Validity.***

The content validity of the two interview guides was established using minitestng. The process involved pretesting the interview questions, helping identify the time required to collect data, question clarity, and inquiry adequacy in gathering satisfactory responses from the experts and African American males. The minitestng was conducted with two school teachers and adult African American male college students

identified on LinkedIn. The minitest was recorded via Zoom. The process involved reading the introduction paragraph of the interview guides, after which I proceeded to ask each interview question. Additionally, the interview guides' content validity was supported by approval from the reviewing committee and IRB.

### ***Sufficiency of Data Collection Instruments to Answer the Research Questions***

Conducting individual minitest interviews via Zoom with four participants (two school teachers and adult African American male college students) helped identify that the data collection process could range from 25, 28, 32, to 35 minutes. It was anticipated that the actual interviews would last for 30 minutes, below the expected interview session of 45 and 90 minutes (see Banks, 2017; Grace & Nelson, 2019; King et al., 2019; P. L. Morgan et al., 2020). However, the discrepancy could be attributed to the differences in the sample size and the number of interview questions. In addition to helping me estimate the anticipated data collection time, the minitest enabled me to edit the interview questions to support their clarity. Some questions were edited if the participants requested me to ask the question again during the minitest. However, the content change was not significant and did not require retesting. Based on the minitest, the two data collection instruments were adequate in collecting data to answer the RQs.

### **Data Collection**

Two interview protocols with eight-items each were used to collect data from the sampled adult African American male students, special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors. The participants understood the program, which supported their suitability to provide perspectives on how special education instructions

might contribute to African American male students' learning experiences, including their self-esteem and self-worth. I sent recruitment flyers to the identified social media group administrators and school management of the three sampled charter high schools in Florida's Broward County School District, informing them about the study. Potential participants who responded to the invitation were assessed for eligibility using a screening tool. The screening tool contained a list of the relevant criteria with yes/no questions. Those who responded "no" to any questions were ineligible to participate in the study. The ineligible participants were thanked, and the call ended. In the case of participants who responded "yes" to all criteria, I informed them of their eligibility and the subsequent procedures that involved signing the consent form and scheduling a 30-minute Zoom interview session.

I collected data via Zoom. I conducted one-on-one Zoom interviews with each participant once for 30 minutes. The participants were interviewed individually, allowing them to provide answers without interruption. Each interview session was anticipated to last for approximately 30 minutes. The Zoom Meetings feature that allows users to record sessions was used. The recording began once the participant joined the session using the individualized invitation link provided. Next, I read the interview guide's introduction paragraph and asked each participant if they had questions before beginning. I responded to any questions the participants asked before commencing with the interview. The recordings were then transcribed into separate Microsoft Word documents by me and sent to the participants for verification. The respondents were given 7 days to provide

feedback. I adjusted the interview transcripts based on the participants' feedback. If the participants did not respond after 7 days, I assumed the transcripts were accurate.

### ***How Participants Exited the Study***

At the beginning of the data collection process, the interviewees were made aware that they could decline to respond to any or all the interview questions without repercussion. The debriefing procedure involved thanking the respondents and assuring them that the collected data would only be reported in the aggregate and used to answer the RQs. The participants could end the Zoom call to exit the study. The participants were sent a copy of the findings.

### ***Follow-Up Procedures***

At the end of the interview, the participants were informed that I might contact them to clarify their responses if the need arose. The follow-up procedure would have involved calling the participant(s) and inquiring whether they could allocate some time to respond to the inquiry. If a respondent replied "yes," I would have asked the question. If the participant said "no," I would have scheduled a suitable time to inquire. However, the automatic recording of data via Zoom decreased the need for additional follow-up, and no additional inquiries were needed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

#### ***Data and Specific Research Questions***

The eight-item interview protocol for experts was used to answer the first and second RQs (see Table 1). Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 were used to answer the first RQ. Questions 5, 6, and 7 were used to answer the second RQ. The data were collected from

the experts, who included special education teachers, school administrators, and counselors. All eight questions in the African American Male interview protocol were used to answer the third RQ.

**Table 1**

*Research Questions and Respective Interview Questions*

Research questions	Interview guide	Interview question number
RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?	Experts' interview guide	1-4
RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?	Experts' interview guide	4-7
RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?	Adult African American male college students	1-8

*Type of and Procedure for Coding, Software, and Discrepant Cases*

The collected and transcribed data were analyzed in a five-step process. First, I organized the 26 transcripts to prepare for the analysis. Second, I read all transcribed data to understand the responses in-depth. I maintained a notebook for jotting down ideas identified by the participants to support the audit trail process. Third, I imported the transcripts into NVivo 12, a computer-aided data analysis software (Qualitative Data



Analysis International, 2023). Fourth, inductive coding was conducted and involved using in vivo terms to categorize similar segments of the participants' responses. Fifth, I used the coding concepts to generate themes and relate them to the RQs. The themes are included in Chapter 4 and supported by the participants' verbatim responses. There were no discrepant cases in the data. Only complete transcripts were analyzed to facilitate consistency and ensure data saturation was achieved for all questions.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential because it helps determine the study's rigor and data quality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Multiple approaches were applied to enhance the findings' internal and external validity. Specifically, trustworthiness was achieved through credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability.

#### **Credibility**

The study's credibility was promoted using transcript verification, member checking, and achieving data saturation (see Hammarberg et al., 2016). Verification involved sending the participants the transcribed document of their responses to confirm whether it accurately represented their answers. Member checking was conducted after the data were analyzed. The process involved sending the respondents the analyzed data to determine if the interpretation was congruent with their feedback. Participants were recruited until saturation was achieved.

#### **Transferability**

The finding's transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the participants, procedures, and context (see Hammarberg et al., 2016). A detailed

description of the participants, procedures, and context is included in Chapter 4. In addition, information on the respondent's age, race/ethnicity, gender, and years of experience is provided to help readers determine the transferability of the findings.

### **Dependability**

The results' dependability was supported by conducting inductive coding (see Hammarberg et al., 2016). The process involved developing codes from the participants' responses. Additionally, applying labeling and punctuated equilibrium theory supported dependability by guiding the development of arguments concordant with what was likely to be accurate and normally expected in the research (see Hammarberg et al., 2016).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was achieved by ensuring my gender, culture, history, or socioeconomic origin did not affect the findings. In addition, I maintained a reflective journal on the research process. I created an audit trail by recording the activities performed, especially during the data analysis process (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Gaining access to experts and adult African American male college students was facilitated by partnering with the school administrators and social media page moderators. I sent the school administrators an email requesting them to post my recruitment flyer in the faculty lounge, newsletter, and social media pages. Another email was sent to social media administrators requesting them to post the recruitment flyer on their pages. Only participants who reached out to me expressing their interest in the study

were contacted and screened to determine eligibility. I complied with the ethical standards by protecting the participants' confidentiality by not collecting personally identifiable data.

I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative program. The certificate underpinned my competency to conduct a study in adherence to ethical standards. I sought IRB approval once the committee approved the study's proposal. After receiving the committee's consent, I applied for IRB approval following the procedures in Walden University's dissertation process. The study was implemented after gaining IRB approval from Walden University. I considered the participants to be autonomous individuals who could make their own decisions, such as refusing to participate in the study. I treated each with respect, dignity, and fairness. Potential participants were required to fulfill the inclusion criteria and write "I consent" on the consent form, implying that they understood what the study entailed. Writing "I consent" and sending the form back to me via email implied that the participants willingly agreed to be part of the study.

Recruitment ethics were not an issue in the study because the target populations were not among vulnerable populations. The participants were asked general demographic questions, such as their race, age, profession, district, education, and involvement in the special education program. The information was only used to determine the participants' eligibility and cannot be used to identify them. During recruitment, the respondents were informed that participation in the study was voluntary

and that they were at liberty to withdraw from the study whenever they wished without repercussions.

Confidentiality was achieved by assigning each participant an alphanumeric code (e.g., A1, C1, T1, AA1, etc.). I was the only one who could match the code with the individual assigned to it. Personal identifying information, such as names, social security, employment, or admission numbers, were not collected. I was the only one who accessed the participants' audio and transcribed responses. However, the participants were informed that excerpts of their responses might be used to support the study's themes. Assurance was provided to the participants that the short excerpts would not contain any information that could be used to identify them.

Additional personally identifiable data, such as phone numbers and home addresses were not collected, protecting the participants' confidentiality. I had no power over the experts or the adult African American male college students. The study did not have any potential psychological, relationship, legal, or professional risks for the participants.

The collected data were efficiently handled to promote confidentiality. Only I could access the collected data, which was stored on a password-protected personal computer. Soft data were stored in a password-protected external hard drive kept in an environment free from water, dust, moisture, or heat to protect the device. The data were uploaded to the Cloud as a backup. All hard copies of the data were stored in a lockable cabinet in my home office. The data were only used to answer the RQs and will be destroyed 5 years after completion of the study. I was responsible for protecting and

appropriately handling the data in conformance with ethical procedures. A copy of the data was also stored in a password-protected computer for analysis. Only I will have access to the personal computer. Once the 5 years elapse, I will dispose of the data by permanently deleting all soft copies and shredding the hard copies.

The participants were not exposed to any risk above the minimum. I did not have a conflict of interest or power over the participants. I did not work in a special education program; therefore, no issues related to the work environment occurred. While the participation was appreciated, the respondents were not compensated for being part of the study.

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study was conducted to answer three RQs. I selected a case study because this design helped me collect special education teachers', school administrators', counselors', and adult African American male adult college students' experiences. Data were collected using two interview guides—one for experts and one for adult African American male adult college students. As an observer, I was responsible for sampling, recruiting, creating the interview protocol, and collecting and analyzing data. The participants were sampled using purposive techniques. Trustworthiness supported the findings' rigor and quality. The study was conducted in adherence to all the ethical considerations. In Chapter 3, I discussed the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and provided a summary. In Chapter 4, I discuss: (a) the research study setting, (b) demographics, (c) data collection and analysis, (e) evidence of trustworthiness, and (f) results.

## Chapter 4: Results

Minoritized populations often experience disparities and under or overrepresentation in certain situations. One area where African American male students are overrepresented is in special education programs (Craft & Howley, 2018). Special education programs should be beneficial, but the unintended consequences of labeling and preconceived beliefs occur. As such, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. The three RQs that guided this study were:

RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?

RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?

RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to

be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?

Chapter 4 contains a discussion on the research setting and demographics. I discuss the data collection process and the steps taken for data analysis. Finally, I provide evidence of trustworthiness, the study's results, and a summary.

### **Research Setting**

I received permission to post a recruitment flyer in the lounges of three charter high schools in the Broward County School District. Additionally, I recruited African American male students via Reddit, Facebook, and LinkedIn. To my knowledge, this study was not associated with organizational or personal conditions, such as budget cuts or personnel changes, that influenced the participants or experiences. As such, no research setting factors influenced the interpretation of the study's results.

### **Demographics**

Data were collected from two sets of participants. The first set were experts who included school administrators ( $n = 6$ ), counselors ( $n = 6$ ), and teachers ( $n = 7$ ). In particular, the school administrators were principals ( $n = 3$ ) and assistant principals ( $n = 3$ ). Most experts were teachers ( $n = 7$ ), while the rest were counselors ( $n = 6$ ). The experts indicated that they had held their positions for 5 to 10 years, making them adequately experienced to provide insightful interview responses. Most experts ( $n = 7$ ) worked in their positions for 5 years. Other participants held their positions for 6 ( $n = 3$ ), 7 ( $n = 3$ ), and 8 ( $n = 3$ ) years. Additionally, one worked in the position for 9 years and the other two for a decade. The majority ( $n = 13$ ) of the experts were White, while the

remaining were African American ( $n = 3$ ) and Asian ( $n = 3$ ). I assigned the participants alphanumeric codes to assure their confidentiality. The administrators' codes were A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6; the teachers' codes were T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, and counselors' codes were C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, and C6 (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Experts' Demographics and Characteristics*

Characteristics	Number	%
Gender		
Male	13	68.4
Female	10	52.6
Experts' position		
Principal	3	15.8
Assistant principal	3	15.8
Counselor	6	31.6
Teacher	7	36.8
Number of years in position		
5	7	36.8
6	3	15.8
7	3	15.8
8	3	15.8
9	1	5.3
10	2	10.5
Ethnicity		
African American	3	15.8
Asian	3	15.8
White	13	68.4

The second set of participants was seven former special education African American male students who were pursuing tertiary education at a university ( $n = 3$ ), college ( $n = 2$ ), and community college ( $n = 2$ ). The participants' ages were 20 ( $n = 2$ ), 21 ( $n = 1$ ), 22 ( $n = 2$ ), 23 ( $n = 1$ ), and 24 ( $n = 1$ ). The students were in their first ( $n = 1$ ), second ( $n = 3$ ), third ( $n = 1$ ), or fourth ( $n = 2$ ) year of study. The alphanumeric codes I



assigned the African American male students were AA1, AA2, AA3, AA4, AA5, AA6, and AA7 (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*African American Males Demographics and Characteristics*

Characteristics	Number	%
Age in years		
20	2	28.6
21	1	14.3
22	2	28.6
23	1	14.3
24	1	14.3
Tertial earning institution		
University	3	42.9
College	2	28.6
Community college	2	28.6
Year of study		
1 <sup>st</sup>	1	14.3
2 <sup>nd</sup>	3	42.9
3 <sup>rd</sup>	1	14.3
4 <sup>th</sup>	2	28.6

### Data Collection

In this study, I collected demographic data and qualitative responses from 26 participants who included special education teachers ( $n = 7$ ), administrators ( $n = 6$ ), counselors ( $n = 6$ ), and African American male students ( $n = 7$ ). All the individual interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom. I began by interviewing the teachers, followed by administrators, then counselors, and finally, the African American male students. The process involved calling each participant 30 minutes before the scheduled time and informing them that I had sent them a link for the Zoom session, which they could use to join when ready. There were cases when the participants joined immediately,

while in others, the participants informed me that they would call to tell me they were ready. Zoom was used to facilitate the data collection process because of the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing directive. Also, Zoom was used because it is a cost-effective and convenient approach for facilitating data collection as opposed to performing in-person one-on-one interviews. In their studies, Archibald et al. (2019) and Oliffe et al. (2021) supported these advantages, indicating that using Zoom videoconferencing to collect data in qualitative research is associated with cost efficacy, convenience, and effective data management.

The shortest interview with the experts took 26 minutes, while the longest lasted 32 minutes (see Table 4). The interviews with the experts were conducted for an average of 28.6 minutes. In contrast, the interviews with the African American students were conducted for an average of 29.1 minutes (see Table 5). The shortest interview with the African American students took 28 minutes, while the longest lasted 31 minutes. The audio data were recorded using Zoom. I transcribed the audio data into 26 Microsoft Word documents and sent them to the respective participants for verification. The transcript verification findings are discussed in the evidence of trustworthiness section of this chapter.

The data collection process was consistent with the one discussed in Chapter 3. A difference was in the participant sample because the initial goal was to recruit 32 experts and former special education African American male students. However, saturation for the experts was achieved with the 19<sup>th</sup> participant: special education teachers ( $n = 7$ ), administrators ( $n = 6$ ), and counselors ( $n = 6$ ). For the African American male students,

saturation was achieved at  $n = 7$ . It was unnecessary to proceed with the data collection beyond the different saturation points. My Zoom software automatically closed when interviewing A1, which was an unusual incident during the data collection process. I had only read the interview guide's introduction and collected demographic data when this occurred; therefore, I did not lose data because of the technical malfunction. I called A1 to explain what had happened, and we rescheduled the interview.

**Table 4**

*Experts' Data Collection Duration*

Participants	Duration in minutes
Interview 1: T1	27
Interview 2: T2	28
Interview 3: T3	29
Interview 4: T4	31
Interview 5: T5	28
Interview 6: T6	27
Interview 7: T7	29
Interview 8: A1	28
Interview 9: A2	28
Interview 10: A3	29
Interview 11: A4	30
Interview 12: A5	32
Interview 13: A6	31
Interview 14: C1	29
Interview 15: C2	28
Interview 16: C3	27
Interview 17: C4	26
Interview 18: C5	29
Interview 19: C6	27
Average	28.6

**Table 5***African Americans' Data Collection Duration*

Participants	Duration in minutes
Interview 20: AA1	29
Interview 21: AA2	30
Interview 22: AA3	30
Interview 23: AA4	31
Interview 24: AA5	28
Interview 25: AA6	28
Interview 26: AA7	29
Average	29.1

**Data Analysis**

I adhered to the five-step data analysis process described in Chapter 3. After organizing and reading the transcripts several times while recording the emerging ideas in my notebook, I imported the transcripts into NVivo 12 to facilitate data management (Qualitative Data Analysis International, 2023). I then began inductive coding, first, with the data from the experts, followed by inductive coding of the data from the responses of the African American adults. The initial coding cycle allowed identification of the in vivo terms relevant to the study and RQs. Consistent with Saldana's (2009) recommendations, I identified the in vivo terms during the first cycle of inductive coding: stigma, racial discrimination, segregation, postsecondary education, school dropout, school-to-prison pipeline, performance, self-deprecation, and self-esteem. Codes for the African American males' responses included stigma, discouragement, self-perception, cultural competence, training, assessments, and self-esteem. Tables 6 and 7 include quotations from the participants' verbatim responses to emphasize their importance.

**Table 6***Codes and Experts' Verbatim Responses*

Codes	Verbatim responses
Stigma	C2 "The negative outcomes would be experiencing stigma."
Racial discrimination	A1 "Can result in a perception of discrimination."
Emotional challenge	C1 "The negative outcome is increased emotional challenges because of the stigma."
Segregation	A2 "The negative outcomes include experiencing segregation."
Self-deprecation	T5 "Can result in self-deprecation among the students and reduced academic performance, which increases the risk of dropouts."
Postsecondary education	T6 "Create the perception that the population has fewer opportunities to succeed or transition to postsecondary education."
School dropout	T4 "Is associated with negative academic outcomes and increasing the risk of school dropout."
School-to-prison pipeline	C5 "Which could all lead to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, establishing a school-to-prison pipeline."
Performance	T7 "Stigma could adversely impact the students' academic performance."
Self-esteem	T3 "Negatively affects the students' academic achievements, resulting in a loss of self-esteem."

**Table 7***Codes and African Americans' Verbatim Responses*

Codes	Verbatim responses
Discouragement	AA2 "The consequences are a risk for school dropout, discouragement of esteem, self-worth."
Self-perception	AA1 "Individuals with learning disabilities develop a negative self-perception of themselves."
Cultural competence	AA1 "Provide teachers training to increase cultural competence."
Training	AA1 "Training educators to be culturally responsive will help them."
Assessments	AA6 "To perform culturally congruent evaluations and effective assessments."
Segregated	AA6 "After I was placed in the special education program, my self-esteem was affected, which resulted in feelings of being unwanted and segregated."
Self-esteem	AA2 "The negative impact was the labeling of being handicap [ <i>sic</i> ] had also an impact on my self-esteem."
Hire	AA2 "Having African American teachers, administrators or counselors would help African American students."

In the second coding cycle, I put the codes into categories, developing the themes used to answer the RQs. The categories included the influence of being labeled with emotional disturbance, the potential influence of preconceived beliefs, and changes (see Table 8). The categories of emotional disturbance and the potential influence of preconceived beliefs were derived from the experts' responses. Subsequently, I developed the themes of stigmatizing feelings, negative perception towards school, reduced academic expectations, and decreased academic performance by combining the codes into phrases that could be easily understood based on the created categories. For the African American students, one category for change was developed. The associated themes included teachers' preparation and training, comprehensive and culturally

congruent assessments and evaluations, and hiring more African American teachers (see Table 9).

**Table 8**

*Experts' First and Second Cycle Coding*

Codes	Categories	Themes
Stigma, racial discrimination, segregation, self-deprecation, and self-esteem	Influence of being labeled with emotional disturbance	Stigmatizing feelings
Loss of interest in learning	Influence of being labeled with emotional disturbance	Negative perception towards school.
Postsecondary education, school dropout, and school-to-prison pipeline.	Potential influence of preconceived beliefs	Reduced academic expectations.
Performance	Potential influence of preconceived beliefs	Decreased academic performance.

**Table 9**

*African Americans' First and Second Cycle Coding*

Codes	Categories	Themes
Stigma, discouragement, self-perception, cultural competence, training, and self-esteem	Change	Teachers' preparation and training.
Assessments	Change	Comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations.
Hire	Change	Hiring more African American teachers

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

I achieved trustworthiness in this study by ensuring the findings had credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Promoting trustworthiness was essential in enhancing the findings' quality and rigor. A discussion of the methods used to demonstrate evidence of trustworthiness is included in the subsequent sections.

#### **Credibility**

I promoted the findings' credibility through transcript verification, member checking, and collecting data to achieve saturation. I performed transcript verification by sending each respondent their transcript, requesting them to confirm whether the study findings accurately represented their responses. Twenty participants confirmed that the transcribed content accurately represented their answers to the interview questions. The other four participants did not respond even after follow-up; therefore, I assumed that the transcripts accurately represented their responses. I performed member checking by sending the respondents a summary of my analysis. Out of the 26 participants to whom I sent a summary of the findings, 15 responded, indicating that the interpreted data accurately represented their thoughts. The other nine participants did not respond, even after follow-up. Accordingly, I assumed they agreed with the study's findings. I achieved saturation for special education teachers ( $n = 7$ ), administrators ( $n = 6$ ), counselors ( $n = 6$ ), and African American male students ( $n = 7$ ).

#### **Transferability**

I supported the findings' transferability by comprehensively describing the sampled participants, data collection and analysis procedures, and the study's context.



When outlining the experts' demographic data, I provided their age, race/ethnicity, gender, number of experiences, and profession in aggregate to promote confidentiality while providing readers with adequate information about the participants' attributes. Similarly, I discussed the African American students' ages and years of study. A description of the data collection and analysis procedures are provided in Chapters 3 and 4, which could help the readers replicate these procedures.

### **Dependability**

I promoted dependability by performing inductive coding. The process involved retrieving codes from the participants' responses. Additionally, I achieved dependability by basing the study's RQs, interview guides, and interpretation on labeling (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) and punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972). Applying the theoretical framework ensured that the study's findings were based on assumptions that were accurate and congruent with what was expected in the research.

### **Confirmability**

I promoted confirmability through reflexivity, which ensured that my gender, history, culture, or socioeconomic factors did not influence the findings' interpretations. Additionally, maintaining a reflective journal provided an audit trail of the core activities. Maintaining a reflective journal enabled me to rationalize all major decisions in the study, such as methodology and design. The audit trail provided a record of all core activities during the participants' recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

## Study Results

Based on the thematic analysis, seven themes emerged from the participants' responses: (a) stigmatizing feelings, (b) negative perception towards school, (c) reduced academic expectations, (d) decreased academic performance, (e) teachers' preparation and training, (f) comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and (g) hiring more African American teachers (see Tables 10 and 11). The themes are discussed in the subsequent sections according to the RQs. Additionally, the themes are supported by the participants' verbatim responses, underpinning the results' trustworthiness.

**Table 10**

*Research Questions and Themes for Experts*

Research questions	Themes
RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?	Stigmatizing feelings Negative perception towards school.
RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?	Reduced academic expectations. Decreased academic performance.

**Table 11***Research Question and Themes for African American Male Students*

Research question	Themes
RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?	Teachers' preparation and training. Comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations. Hiring more African American teachers.

**Research Question 1: Emotional Disturbance Labeling, Self-Worth, and Self-Esteem**

The first RQ was the following: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years? The aim was to explore the influence of labeling African American male students. Accordingly, two themes emerged: stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards school.

***Stigmatizing Feelings***

The experts indicated that when African American students are labeled with emotional disturbance, it results in stigmatizing feelings that emerge due to the perception that they are being discriminated against or segregated. Notable, the stigmatizing feelings occur particularly when the students are inappropriately assigned to special education programs. For instance, A1 posited, "Inappropriately placing African

American male students in special education programs can result in a perception of discrimination and stigmatizing feelings.” As such, the stigmatizing feeling could create a perception among the students that they are incapable of success. A2’s response was focused on how being labeled results in segregation. The administrator noted that “negative outcomes are more likely to occur when the students perceive their allocation to special learning institutions as unfair and unjustifiable. The negative outcomes include experiencing segregation and being discriminated against, which could result in emotional challenges.” A4 added to the discussion by indicating that “identifying with the label can cause stigma, resulting in disinterest in the learning process. A loss of interest in learning increases the students' likelihood of dropping out of school.”

Like the administrators, the counselors also reported that being labeled with emotional disturbance can result in stigmatizing feelings. Specifically, C1 said, “The negative outcome is increased emotional challenges because of the stigma associated with being placed in a special education program, a factor that increases the likelihood of dropping out of school.” Notably, C2 acknowledged that although placing African American male students in special education programs provide them with necessary accommodations, modifications, and remediations, negative outcomes can occur, especially if the allocation is inappropriate. According to C5, “If African American male children are mistakenly placed in special education programs, they may feel discriminated against or stigmatized, leading to negative feelings.” C2 posited that “the negative outcomes would be experiencing stigma associated with the negative connotation of being assigned to a special needs program.” C3 indicated, “The

unintended consequences of placing students in special education programs, specifically segregation and discrimination, can increase the students' emotional challenges."

Based on the teachers' perception, special education programs can help the learners manage their emotional and behavioral problems when the placement is accurate. T5 explained, "When the right African American male students are placed in special education programs, the possible positive outcome includes effective management of behavioral issues, improved coping competencies, high graduation, and better attendance." The respondent provided an alternative perception by saying that "the inappropriate categorization of African American male students into an emotional behavior special education program could be perceived as a form of discrimination, resulting in feelings of stigmatization." Additionally, T2 noted, "Some negative outcomes include experiencing stigmatizing feelings that often result in negative perceptions of learning. Stigmatizing feelings negatively impacts students' self-worth and self-esteem, which can develop or exacerbate emotional and behavioral problems."

According to T3, "Conforming can result in stigma and loss of self-worth, increasing the probability of the students remaining in the programs during their entire academic period." In addition, T3's perception was that when students are misclassified, inappropriately placed in special education programs, and labeled, feelings of inferiority emerge. The respondent stated, "A negative outcome could occur when students are misclassified, which increases their exposure to a less rigorous curriculum, resulting in feeling inferior." T7 added, "Feeling inferior can negatively impact self-esteem and self-worth." T4 provided a broader perspective:

Accepting the label is associated with a loss of self-esteem, exposing the students to stigma, which is associated with negative academic outcomes and increases the risk of school dropout. In addition, dropping out of high school for African American males is associated with the peril of being involved in crime and ending up in prison.

### ***Negative Perception Towards School***

When African American male students are labeled with emotional disturbance, the experts indicated that the students develop a negative perception towards school. The negative perception was reported to be closely related to the stigma experienced by the students. For example, A1 indicated, “Being placed in a special education program could result in negative feelings of stigma among students, creating an unpleasant experience in high school.” A2 added to the discussion by stating that “feelings of stigmatization could negatively impact the students' dedication to learning. The reduced dedication could result in the desire to leave school because of the lack of fulfillment.” A5 elaborated on A1’s and A2’s responses, stating, “Stigmatization could result in having a negative perception of school, which is associated with decreased focus on learning, reduced academic performance, and increased dropouts, [and] contributes to the school-to-prison phenomenon.”

The counselors also acknowledged that labeling results in a negative perception of school. C1 noted, “A negative outcome is feeling stigmatized and segregated, which could create a negative perception among the students, resulting in decreased learning outcomes.” Based on C5’s experience, the negative perception towards school among

African American students is demonstrated by “worsened attendance rates, lower test scores, and greater disciplinary cases, which could all lead to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, establishing a school-to-prison pipeline.”

T3 indicated that “the misidentified students are likely to have a negative experience in high school because they would perceive that the system discriminated against them.” Subsequently, T3 stated, “The stigmatizing feelings can result in divergent behaviors or a loss of academic interests, resulting in school dropouts.” Like T3, T1 acknowledged that being labeled results in a negative perception, which causes a loss of interest in learning. These arguments were supported by T5, who explained, “African American male students, particularly those inappropriately classified, usually develop a negative perception towards school, which decreases their academic motivation and ability to achieve required outcomes actively.”

T6 acknowledged that it is rare for African Americans to transition from special education programs. However, the teacher said that “when the assessment is inaccurate, it could result in stigmatization and undesirable attitudes towards learning, decreasing academic performance. In addition, decreased academic performance could cause frustrations among African American male students, resulting in emotional problems.” T7 summarized the other teachers’ responses by arguing, “The inappropriate placement of African American males in special education programs creates inequality, negatively impacting the population's perception of learning, which could hinder the students from achieving the program outcomes.”

## **Research Question 2: Preconceived Beliefs, High School Experience, and Cultural Responsiveness**

The second RQ was: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness? The aim was to understand the influence of preconceived beliefs among the administrators and faculty on African American male students' high school experience. Based on the thematic analysis, two themes were identified: reduced academic expectations and decreased academic performance.

### ***Reduced Academic Expectations***

An exploration of the collected data helped identify that preconceived beliefs were responsible for reduced academic expectations among African American male students in special education programs, resulting in a negative experience. Based on A1's response, when students are placed in special education programs, there are preconceived beliefs that result in low learning expectations. The principal said that "having low learning expectations is associated with reduced academic achievement and demotivates the students from actively focusing on their academics, which could result in school dropout, initiating the school-to-prison pipeline." A5 added to the discussion by offering his perspective that preconceived beliefs that special education learners are inferior often negatively affect the students' academic success. He noted, "The preconceived beliefs create a situation where African American male students perceive that they are inferior



and lack the capabilities to succeed. Such beliefs could hinder the students from graduating high school.” A5 continued by adding, “Special education programs, specifically for students with emotional challenges, should have some academic rigor, so they are not viewed as inferior to the other approaches, which could eliminate the feelings of stigmatization.”

Based on the counselors’ perspectives, preconceived beliefs about students in special education programs result in low self-esteem and self-worth, which are associated with decreased academic achievement. C1 indicated, “The reduced academic achievements could result in a decline in the students’ graduation rates.” Similarly, C2 posited, “The preconceived beliefs about the African American male students in a special education program could negatively influence the self-efficacy to achieve academic success and self-worth.” C4 added to the influence of preconceived perception by indicating, “The students in the programs can have low academic expectations, a challenge that results in an achievement gap.” The respondent continued, stating that “low expectations negatively impact academic performance, which increases the risk of not enrolling in further education.”

The teachers also posited that their preconceived perceptions of students in special education often result in experiences of reduced academic expectations among the learners. For example, T1 noted, “Teachers often have lower expectations for students placed in special education programs, which could negatively impact the students' self-concepts.” T2 added, “When teachers have reduced academic expectations, African American male students can have a negative experience during high school. The reduced

expectations can demotivate the students from advancing their educational aspirations, which creates a likelihood of dropping out.” According to T4, “The negative experience can be associated with the teachers’ reduced academic expectations, which results in students having substandard academic attainment.” T6 argued, “The low expectations from the administrators and faculty members could adversely impact the African American male adults’ capability to achieve excellence and create the perception that the population has fewer opportunities to succeed or transition to postsecondary education.”

### ***Decreased Academic Performance***

It was identified that preconceived beliefs are associated with decreased academic performance among African American male students in special education programs for emotional and behavioral issues. The respondents indicated that preconceived beliefs are associated with stigma, which affects the learners’ academic performance. For example, A1 stated, “When teachers have preconceived beliefs of the learners’ capabilities, it creates stigmatizing feelings that often negatively impact the students’ self-efficacy and self-worth, adversely affecting academic performance, and in the long-term, affect graduation and transition to higher learning.” A3 was not ignorant that placing African American males in special education programs promotes academic progress by ensuring the students have a written plan with the appropriate accommodations to help them overcome their emotional challenges. However, A3 also noted there are negative outcomes when preconceived beliefs about the student population exist, which the administrator stated are “low expectations that result in decreased academic performance, increasing the likelihood of not enrolling in higher education.” Another administrator,

A4, posited, “The possible negative outcomes could be lower attendance rates and test scores and higher disciplinary rates.”

Similarly, C2 added to the discussion on decreased academic performance by claiming that “preconceived beliefs influence the students’ performance and increase the likelihood of lower academic achievement.” As a result, overall low academic performance among the students negatively impacts the student’s graduation from high school and transition into higher education. Based on C3’s explanation, reduced academic performance could be attributed to the preconceived perception that students in special education programs are intellectually inferior.

The teachers acknowledged that preconceived beliefs about special education students could result in reduced academic performance, especially when they internalize that being in a special education program is associated with being inferior. For example, T2 stated, “A negative outcome is reduced academic achievement, which often results in frustration. The frustration can cause the students to experience more behavioral problems that increase the risk of dropping out of school.” Notably, reduced academic achievement was supported by T3, who explained, “The exposure to a less rigorous curriculum negatively affects the student’s academic achievements, resulting in a loss of self-esteem.” T5 noted, “The actions by the faculty and administrators, specifically ineffectively allocating African American male adults in special education programs, can result in self-deprecation among the students and reduced academic performance, which increases the risk of dropouts.”

T6 discussed preconceived beliefs, noting they “can result in the students remaining in the program for the entire time in high school, which could decrease the population's graduation rate.” T7 approached reduced academic performance from the students’ perspectives. In essence, the teacher believed that when African American male students are assigned to special education programs with preconceived beliefs about interventions, it adversely affects their self-esteem and self-worth. T7 stated, “The decline in self-esteem and self-worth results in emotional and behavioral issues’ increase, creating a need for additional interventions.”

### **Research Question 3: Changes Need to be Made to Minimize the Potential**

#### **Unintended Consequence of Low Self-Esteem and Self-Worth**

The third RQ was: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males? The aim of developing this RQ was to explore the changes African American male students perceive should be implemented to mitigate the unintended consequences of extended involvement in the special education program.

Notably, African American male students reported experiencing low self-esteem and self-worth, consistent with the responses provided by the teachers. For instance, AA2 posited, “The negative impact was the labeling of being handicap [*sic*] had also an impact on my self-esteem.” Similarly, AA6 explained, “After I was placed in the special

education program, my self-esteem was affected, which resulted in feelings of being unwanted and segregated.” AA5 stated, “Initially, being assigned to a special education program limited my capability to interact with others because I felt insufficient. My self-esteem was low, which made me feel inferior. Hence, I would avoid any interactions.” Consequently, a thematic analysis of participants’ responses, specifically those related to the needed changes, identified three themes: teachers’ preparation and training, comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and hiring more African American teachers.

### ***Teachers’ Preparation and Training***

The African American male students recommended increasing teachers’ preparation and offering training to improve their cultural competencies. Based on these participants’ responses, their inappropriate placement in the special education program for emotional disturbance was associated with inadequate cultural competencies among the learners. For instance, AA1 indicated, “There is a need to provide teachers training to increase cultural competence.” The respondent also suggested ensuring that committees of decision-makers are racially diverse. AA1 elaborated on the essence of increasing the teachers’ cultural awareness: “Training educators to be culturally responsive will help them recognize the cultural characteristics of African Americans and other students of color.” The student continued by stating that “the increased cultural competency would result in the sense of harmony enabling the teachers to recognize the connection between people and their environment. Likewise, the skill could result in the teachers being more sensitive to nonverbal and situational messages.” AA1 emphasized, “Educators need to

be aware of these and other cultural characteristics to reduce misinterpretations that lead to referrals to special education.”

AA2 believed that “teachers’ training to increase their cultural understanding should be performed to enhance the student’s experience in high school. Providing racial diversity and cultural knowledge will ensure better community integration.” AA5 provided an association between cultural awareness and assessments, noting: “Teachers, in particular White educators who lack cultural competencies, should be provided with training interventions to increase their skills. The training can also improve the teachers’ cultural awareness, ensuring that the assessments are accurate.” AA6 added, “The training can increase the educators’ competencies to perform culturally congruent evaluations and effective assessments.” Increased cultural competence could ensure that the special education program placements are accurate. As such, African American male students would receive the needed assistance to overcome their behavioral issues and transition out of the program instead of requiring intervention the entire time they are in high school.

### ***Comprehensive and Culturally Congruent Assessments and Evaluations***

Another recommendation was for assessments and evaluations to be comprehensive and culturally congruent. The strategy is proactive because it would reduce the inappropriate placement of African American male students in special education programs. AA1 posited, “During assessments, diversity should be considered to ensure that students are effectively understood.” AA3 argued for the need for comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations because “it is easier

to put us in special education than spend the time and resources for psychological evaluation and personal counseling. We did not have the means to [access] other resources.” Accordingly, comprehensive assessments could ensure that students receive the appropriate intervention, including counseling, and not just be placed in special education programs.

AA4 expressed his disapproval of the assessments and evaluations by indicating, “I did not agree with the selection process that led to my enrollment in the special education program. I believed that the program was for children who were intellectually behind their classmates, but I was not as far apart.” AA4 explained, “I believe each student’s requirements should be considered when modifying the necessity for assignment to a special education program. Each student should be assessed based on their unique needs rather than assigned to a program based on generic requirements.”

AA5 noted, “The assessments should be adequately comprehensive and culturally sensitive to support the team in making informed decisions.” Additionally, the suggestion to make the program comprehensive involved different stakeholders. AA5 argued, “During the assessment, the information should be obtained from teachers, parents, and other school professionals to ensure the process is comprehensive.” A detailed response on the comprehensive nature of the program was offered by AA6, who argued that:

The evaluation team should collect information on students from different sources, such as observations, classroom samples, and anecdotal records. Also, collecting information from different individuals, such as parents, teachers, counselors, and caregivers, could increase assessment accuracy. Assessing the

students' adaptive functioning, social relationships, cognitive ability, and academic achievements could be important in ensuring that learners are evaluated in different environments when doing various activities and at varying times.

### ***Hiring More African American Teachers***

The other strategy two participants recommended was increasing the representation of African American teachers in charter schools. AA2 argued, "Having African American teachers, administrators, or counselors would help African American students." Similarly, AA6 said, "The number of African American male teachers in the workforce should be increased because it would promote cultural diversity in the setting." The participants noted that African American teachers were few in their project setting, but more would ensure that the students' and teachers' diversity is congruent.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. A thematic analysis of the 26 transcripts from administrators, teachers, counselors, and African American male students resulted in the identification of (a) stigmatizing feelings, (b) negative perception towards school, (c) reduced academic expectations, (d) decreased academic performance, (e) teachers' preparation and training, (f) comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and (g) hiring more African American teachers. In Chapter 5, these themes are interpreted. Additionally, Chapter 5 contains discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. Using qualitative methodology enabled me to explore the phenomenon of focus from the perspectives of administrators, teachers, counselors, and African American male adults. The need to conduct this study was due to the overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs, resulting in unintended consequences that impact their self-worth and self-esteem. Subsequently, the unintended consequences negatively affect students' academic performance and high school graduation, increasing the school-to-prison pipeline (Ford & Russo, 2016; Grace & Nelson, 2019; H. Morgan, 2020; Raufu, 2017). Chapter 5 is organized into the following five sections: (a) findings interpretation, (b) limitations of the study, (c) recommendations, (d) implications, and (e) conclusion.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this study, conducting a thematic analysis resulted in the identification of seven themes: (a) stigmatizing feelings, (b) negative perception towards school, (c) reduced academic expectations, (d) decreased academic performance, (e) teachers' preparation and training, (f) comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and (g) hiring more African American teachers. The findings were categorized according to the RQs in the subsequent sections. The findings were interpreted based on how they confirmed, disconfirmed, or extended the knowledge in published literature and theoretical framework, supporting credibility.

### **Interpretation of Research Question 1 Findings: Experts**

The first research question that guided this study was: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years? The themes that emerged were stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards school. As such, it was identified that when African American male students are labeled with emotional disturbance, it influences their self-worth and self-esteem, resulting in stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards learning.

Stigmatizing feelings as an outcome of being placed in a special education program has been supported in the published literature. In particular, Marsh and Noguera (2018), who applied the labeling theory, found that categorizing African American students as special education learners results in stigma. Congruent with the qualitative study's findings, Bal et al. (2019) and Banks (2017) also noted that stigma is the main unintended consequence of placing students in a special education program. In addition, Becker (1963), Krohn et al. (2019), and Lemert (1967) made a theoretical assertion that being labeled results in stigmatizing feelings. Accordingly, this study identified that the stigmatizing feelings result in additional emotional issues that cause students to remain in special education programs and lose interest in learning.

Banks (2017) and Rynders (2019) noted that African American students in special education programs often feel that education is a burden. The findings confirm this

study's findings because the administrators, counselors, and teachers indicated that this labeling results in negative perceptions towards school and learning, increasing the probability of dropping out. The study's results extend knowledge in the discipline, supporting that labeling African American students in special education programs results in stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions that can be attributed to school dropout and the commencement of the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **Interpretation of Research Question 2 Findings: Experts**

The second RQ was: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness? It was identified that the preconceived beliefs result in reduced academic expectations and decreased performance among African American male students in special education programs. The findings extend knowledge in the discipline because it was found that reduced academic expectations are associated with the preconceived belief that students in special education programs are inferior. Also, in this study, it was identified that the preconceived beliefs among students that special education programs are associated with lower academic rigor results in reduced academic expectations. Woodson and Harris (2018) claimed that the overrepresentation of African American male students in the workforce is associated with decreased academic performance, which increases the probability of dropping out. The administrators, counselors, and teachers stated that these preconceived beliefs lead to reduced academic performance among the students, which causes frustration, a catalyst

for emotional problems, and prolongs the students' need for special education programs, with some dropping out.

### **Interpretation of Research Question 3 Findings: African American Male Adults**

The third RQ was: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males? The themes that emerged to answer the RQ were: (a) teachers' preparation and training, (b) comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and (c) hiring more African American teachers. The findings are congruent with evidence in the published literature. Alqarni (2016), Chen and Lindo (2018), and Green and Stormont (2018) proposed solutions that could be implemented to minimize the overrepresentation of African American male adults and decrease unintended consequences, including recruiting ethnically diverse teachers, increasing White teachers' cultural awareness and sensitivity and application of homogeneous referral criteria. Alqarni (2016) and Voulgarides et al. (2017) noted that the teacher workforce predominantly comprises Whites who lack adequate cultural awareness. Bottiani et al. (2018) and Connor (2017) recommended teacher training programs to increase their cultural competencies and responsiveness. Fish (2019) and Woodson and Harris (2018) acknowledged that White teachers are significantly represented in the workforce. Billingsley et al. (2019) supported increasing teachers' ethnic diversity because it would benefit all students.

The need to hire more African American teachers was proposed as a possible strategy for minimizing the unintended consequences of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males. The findings in this study extend the published literature as the participants indicated that teachers' preparation and training should be completed to decrease cultural incongruence, a leading cause of overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs. Training and preparation can increase White teachers' cultural awareness and sensitivity to ensure they accurately interpret African American male students' emotional challenges. In addition, teacher training could improve their ability to perform comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments. The findings of this study extend knowledge in the discipline by proposing that student assessments can be made comprehensive and culturally congruent by (a) collecting information from different sources and individuals; (b) considering the learners' adaptive functioning, social relationships, cognitive abilities, and academic achievements; and (c) taking into consideration the students' unique needs rather than being assigned to a program based on a set of generic requirements. In essence, this strategy would result in increased accuracy of the assessment and evaluation process, preventing student misclassification.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations associated with this study were associated with the methodology, sample, and data analysis. One limitation was that this study was conducted using qualitative methodology and case study design. The focus was collecting qualitative data from charter school administrators, counselors, teachers, and African American male

students. The participants provided subjective information, which could have involved providing responses that they thought I needed to answer the RQs. The limitation might have affected the findings' dependability and transferability, especially for participants in public or private school special education programs.

A second limitation was that the former special education program students who were interviewed graduated from high school between 2018 and 2020. Although the students provided insightful strategies for mitigating the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs and unintended consequences, some suggestions might already have been implemented between 2018 and 2020. A study using more recent graduates might add insight into the Broward County School District's progress.

The third limitation was that despite the inclusion of detailed descriptions of the sampling, data collection, and data analysis processes, it could be challenging to replicate the study. It would be difficult for a future researcher to recruit participants with the exact attributes of those in this study. This limitation could affect the study's transferability. Fourth, interpretation bias may have occurred during data analysis. I was the only researcher who collected and analyzed data in this study, which could have resulted in interpretation bias. More than one researcher could not analyze data because this study partially fulfilled the requirements for a doctoral degree.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations for future researchers are based on this study's strengths and weaknesses. In the published literature, there was a limited understanding of the

impact of special education on African American males (Bal et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). The findings in this study add to the published literature by providing an understanding of the influence of labeling on students' self-worth and self-esteem, the impact of preconceived beliefs on African American students' high school experience, and the strategies that should be implemented to mitigate the unintended consequences. One recommendation for future researchers is to replicate the study to confirm or expand the current understanding of special education and African American male students. Future researchers can interview administrators, special education teachers, and counselors to explore how labeling and preconceived beliefs influence students. Also, future researchers can recruit African American male adults to collect data on how the unintended consequences of being assigned to a special education program their entire time in high school can be mitigated.

The study involved administrators, counselors, teachers, and African American students affiliated with charter schools. Hence, another recommendation is for future researchers to conduct a similar study in a different setting, particularly public and private schools. This qualitative case study has numerous limitations that could have been moderated if a quantitative or mixed-methods design had been used. Therefore, another recommendation is for future researchers to conduct studies using quantitative and mixed methods to reduce limitations. For instance, applying quantitative methodology would decrease the subjectivity associated with a qualitative approach (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Using quantitative methodology would allow the use of  $G^*$  power to determine an adequately powered sample size (Hong et al., 2019). Mixed-methods methodology would enable the researcher to mitigate the limitations of conducting either a qualitative or quantitative study. In this study, method and investigator triangulation were not performed. Accordingly, the recommendation for future researchers is to involve more than one investigator. Future researchers could also use other data sources, such as focus groups and observations.

### **Implications**

In this section, I include implications of the study's findings for social change. Implications for methodological, theoretical, and empirical implications are also included. The final section provides a discussion of the recommendations for future practice.

#### **Implications for Social Change**

The overrepresentation of African American male students in special education programs is a prevailing problem that results in social injustice (Johnson et al., 2018). In the published literature, researchers have demonstrated that African American males are overrepresented in special education programs, an issue traced back to 1960 (Billingsley et al., 2019; H. Morgan, 2020; Raufu, 2017). Although being placed in special education programs is intended to be beneficial, unintended consequences occur (Bal et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). For instance, African American male students often experience the unintended consequences of reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy. In addition, researchers have argued that the unintended consequences and preconceived perceptions



of students in special education result in a negative high school experience for these students, which can be attributed to reduced graduation rates, creating a school-to-prison pipeline (Bal et al., 2019; Banks, 2017; Raufu, 2017).

In this study, it was identified that being labeled with emotional disturbance influences African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, resulting in stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards school. The findings support the fact that inappropriately assigning African American male students and labeling them with emotional disturbance negatively impacts their graduation from high school, which often results in increased dropout rates and has implications for social change. Hence, it is important to ensure that referral to special education programs for emotional disturbance does not result in unintended consequences. Another implication is that preconceived beliefs about African American male students in special education programs result in a negative high school experience, which reduces academic expectations and decreases academic performance. In addition, these experiences often result in frustration, increasing emotional issues that could result in dropping out. As such, this study's implication for social change is the need to eliminate preconceived perceptions about students in special education programs.

### **Methodological, Theoretical, and Empirical Implications**

Using qualitative methodology and a case study design helped to explore and better understand the influence special education programs may have on African American males' self-esteem and self-worth. The first methodological implication is that qualitative methodology is suitable for exploring a phenomenon with limited

understanding. A second methodological implication is that the results support the adequacy of interview guides based on semistructured interviews with open-ended questions for adequate data collection to answer the RQs. In this study, I developed interview questions based on published literature and labeling (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) and punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972), which assisted in answering the RQs. The third methodological implication is that despite the subjective qualitative approach, it is suitable for guiding in-depth data collection founded on experiences and knowledge to derive meaning.

The implication for labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) is that the results support the framework's application for understanding the stigmatizing feelings and unintended consequences that African American male students experience in conforming to the label of being placed in special education programs. The implication for punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gould & Eldredge, 1972) is that the study's findings support the framework's application for understanding that policies related to special education assessments and evaluation often result in African American students being overrepresented in these programs. Punctuated equilibrium theory can be applied to understand the initiatives promoting cultural congruence, which should be implemented to mitigate the unintended consequences of placing African American male students in special education programs.

An empirical implication of the study is that the finding that labeling results in stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards school add to existing literature. Identifying that preconceived beliefs resulted in reduced academic expectations and

decreased academic performance also adds to the existing literature. Another empirical implication is that the identified strategies of (a) teachers' preparation and training, (b) comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and (c) hiring more African American teachers, add to published literature on how the unintended consequences of being placed in a special education program can be moderated.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The overrepresentation of African American male students results in unintended consequences that can be reduced. Hence, in this study, there are four recommendations for practice. The recommendations are categorized by experts or African American male students.

#### ***Experts***

The first recommendation for practice is based on the findings from interviews with the experts in this study. Policy makers and educational professionals need to understand the unintended consequences of labeling and preconceived beliefs about African American male students placed in special education programs. Understanding that unintended consequences occur could help create change and the adoption of the three recommended practices discussed in the next section.

#### ***African American Male Students***

A major cause of the overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs is the lack of cultural competence among the teachers. Based on the African American students' responses, the second recommendation for practice is for district superintendents and school administrators to improve teachers' cultural

competence through training or continuous learning. School-funded training sessions, seminars, or workshops should be introduced to increase cultural competencies. Increased cultural awareness would mean that teachers accurately interpret students' behaviors.

The third recommendation for practice is based on the African American male students' responses that assessments and evaluations be comprehensive and culturally congruent. School leaders can ensure that the assessments and evaluations achieve this by (a) performing them in different settings to ensure an overall understanding of students' functioning in different environments (class, hallway, recess), periods, and activities; and (b) retrieving the information from multiple sources, such as teachers, parents, and caregivers. Comprehensive assessments could ensure that students are provided with the most appropriate intervention, such as counseling, instead of being labeled as having an emotional disturbance and placed in special education programs, where they remain their entire time in high school. The fourth recommendation for practice is for more African American teachers to be added to the workforce. School leaders and policy makers should improve recruitment and retention of African American teachers.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative methodology research based on a case study design helped to provide a better understanding of the following main factors. First, labeling African American male students with emotional disturbance influences their self-worth and self-esteem, resulting in stigmatizing feelings and negative perceptions towards school. Second, potential preconceived beliefs about students result in reduced academic expectations and decreased academic performance. Third, the changes that need to be

made to minimize the potential unintended consequences of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males include: (a) teachers' preparation and training, (b) comprehensive and culturally congruent assessments and evaluations, and (c) hiring more African American teachers.

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## Appendix A: Charter High Schools Administrators Invitation Email

Principal

Name of School

Address

Dear Principal

My name is, and I am a student at Walden University in their Ph.D. Public Policy and Administration Program. I am conducting a study called *Understanding the Impact of Special Education Programs on African American Males* that aims to explore and better understand the influence of special education programs and faculty contribute to African American males' learning experiences, including their self-esteem and self-worth and obtain recommendations on how Broward County School District can improve special education in high school to minimize these unintended consequences. This study is partial degree fulfillment of the Ph.D. program.

The purpose of this letter is to request that you post the attached flyer in the teachers' lounge, newsletter, and social media site. As indicated on the flyer, I am seeking participation from school administrators, teachers, and counselors. The individuals who contact me will be screened to ensure they meet the participation criteria and provided a Consent Form further explaining the voluntary nature of the study and ensuring their confidentiality will be maintained. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom, scheduled at a time convenient to the participant, and estimated to last no more than 30 minutes. The study results will be reported in the aggregate and in no way connected to your organization or the participants to the findings.

If you need additional information before you honor this request, you may contact me at [xxx@waldenu.edu](mailto:xxx@waldenu.edu). Also, you can contact the University's IRB Director: Dr. xxx and [mail.waldenu.edu](mailto:mail.waldenu.edu)

Sincerely



Appendix B: Experts Recruitment Flyer

**Project's Title:** Understanding the Impact of Special education Programs on African American

orth.

gibility. You can part of the project.

**Please feel free to share this flyer with others who might be interested.**



**Time Requirements**

regarding the study.

## Appendix C: Social Media Administrators Invitation Email

Dear Administrator,

My name is, and I am a student in the Ph.D. Public Policy and Administration Program. I am conducting a study called *Understanding the Impact of Programs Special Education on African American Males* that aims to explore and better understand the influence of special education programs and faculty contribute to African American males' learning experiences, including their self-esteem and self-worth and obtain recommendations on how Broward County School District can improve special education in high school to minimize these unintended consequences. This study is partial degree fulfillment of the Ph.D. program. I am emailing you to seek your assistance in advertising the study on your social media platform. I am looking for adult African American male students. The study is Zoom interview-based and only requires 30 minutes of a participant's time. This request only asks you to post a flyer on your social media platform. Participation is voluntary, as indicated on the flyer, and no personal identifying information will be collected. Interested individuals will contact me directly for additional information and screening for eligibility. The study results will be reported in the aggregate and in no way connect your organization or the participants to the findings. I have attached it. I appreciate your time. If you need additional information before you honor this request, you may contact me at [xxx@waldenu.edu](mailto:xxx@waldenu.edu). Also, you can contact the University's IRB director: Dr. [xxx@mail.waldenu.edu](mailto:xxx@mail.waldenu.edu)

Sincerely,

## Appendix D: African American Male Adults Recruitment Flyer

**Project's Title:** Understanding the Impact of Special education Programs on African American worth.

**Eligibility:** You can part of the project.

**Please feel free to share this flyer with others who might be interested.**



**Time Requirements**

## Appendix E: Screening Tool for Experts

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Do you work at.....? (The high school must be one of the three sample schools)		
Do you hold the position of a special education teacher, school administrator, or counselor?		
Do you have experience teaching African American males in special education programs?		
African American/Black _____ Asian/Alaskan Native _____ Hispanic (non-White) _____ White (non-Hispanic) _____		

I informed each participant whether they qualified or not. Individuals who qualified were sent a consent form and requested to indicate when they would be available for the Zoom interview. Respondents who did not qualify were thanked for their interest and provided a rationale for why they would not be involved in the study.

## Appendix F: Screening Tool for Adult African American Males

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Are you an African American male?		
Are you 18 years or older?		
Did you attend special education for emotional disturbance the entire time you were in a charter high school?		
Did you study in Florida's Broward County School District?		
Are you pursuing tertiary education in a college, university, or community college?		

I informed each participant whether they qualified or not. Individuals who qualified were sent a consent form and requested to indicate when they would be available for the Zoom interview. Respondents who did not qualify were thanked for their interest and provided a rationale for why they would not be involved in the study.

### Appendix G: Experts Interview Guide

I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The interview will last for 30 minutes. The information you provide in the interview will be recorded and only used for this study. As a reminder of the information in the consent form, your participation is voluntary, and you will not be compensated for your participation. You may choose to answer some or all the questions, stop at any time, and withdraw, and even after you complete the interview, you can request that your input not be used. Your participation and comments are confidential; the information provided will not be shared with anyone, will be reported in the aggregate in the final document, and will be destroyed after 5 years. (Ask the participant for any questions before starting).

**Alphanumeric Code**.....

RQ1: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how labeling with emotional disturbance influence African American male students' self-worth and self-esteem, especially when there is a lack of African American teachers by the end of the student's high school years?

1. How do you perceive the special education program in terms of students' and teachers' racial representation?
2. What unintended consequences could arise from placing African American male students in special education programs?
3. Among African American males with behavioral problems, what issues could arise from being placed in a special education program?
4. Does the conformance of African American male students to the label of being placed in special education hinder their graduation from high school? If yes or no, explain.

RQ2: For administrators and faculty who have experience teaching a special education curriculum, what themes emerge in their reports of how potential preconceived beliefs about students contribute to the African American male's high school experience, considering the programs' cultural responsiveness?

5. Do the administration and faculty of special education programs contribute to how African American males view their experiences during high school? If yes or no, please explain.
6. What culturally relevant pedagogy should be introduced to mitigate how African American males view their experiences during high school?
7. What teacher-specific interventions should be introduced to mitigate how African American males view their experiences during high school?
8. Do you have anything you would like to add?

## Appendix H: African American Males Interview Guide

I wish to thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The interview will last for 30 minutes. The information you provide in the interview will be recorded and only used for this study. As a reminder of the information in the consent form, your participation is voluntary, and you will not be compensated for your participation. You may choose to answer some or all the questions, stop at any time, and withdraw, and even after you complete the interview, you can request that your input not be used. Your participation and comments are confidential; the information provided will not be shared with anyone, will be reported in the aggregate in the final document, and will be destroyed after 5 years. (Ask the participant for any questions before starting).

### **Alphanumeric Code**.....

RQ3: For African American males who were enrolled in a Broward County School District special education program for emotional disturbance throughout their entire time in high school, what themes emerge in their reports of what changes need to be made to minimize the potential unintended consequence of low self-esteem and self-worth in African American adult males?

1. How did you perceive the special education program that you were enrolled in?
2. What unintended consequences did you experience from being placed in special education programs?
3. What changes in determining the need for assignment should be done to improve the special education instruction program?
4. What changes in academic expectations are needed to improve the special education instruction program?
5. How do you perceive the introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy to enhance African American males' experience during high school?
6. What teacher-specific interventions of culturally relevant pedagogy need to be introduced to enhance African American males' experience during high school?
7. What changes should be made to accommodate African American males with emotional and behavioral problems?
8. Do you have anything you would like to add?