4-21-2025

Environmental and Systemic Barriers to Pursuing Postsecondary Education for Young African American Men From Single Parent Households

Felix A. Weston
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Felix A. Weston

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Debra Wilson, Committee Chairperson,
Social Work Faculty

Dr. Curtis Davis, Committee Member,
Social Work Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2025

Abstract

Environmental and Systemic Barriers to Pursuing Postsecondary Education for Young African American Men From Single Parent Households

by

Felix A. Weston

MSW, University of South Carolina, 2014

BS, Benedict College, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work

Walden University

May 2025

Abstract

African American men often face significant environmental and systemic barriers in pursuing postsecondary education as shown by research on the experiences of African American male high school students and first-generation college students. The experiences of African American men who have not attended college or postsecondary education have received less attention. The purpose of this study was to explore the environmental and systemic barriers experienced by African American men aged 18–24 who have not attended or pursued college or postsecondary education. A qualitative study was conducted with 15 African American men aged 18–24 from single parent households utilizing the ecological model of systems theory as the theoretical framework. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data. Identified through thematic analysis, the findings yielded five themes: neighborhood violence, lack of teacher and administrative support, college preparation, understanding of the college admission process, and mentors/role models. The results may expand the current literature and understanding of the complexities of environmental and systemic barriers faced by young African American men in participating in higher education. Using the findings, stakeholders may be able to provide resources that improve minority enrollment in college or post-secondary education, thus promoting positive social change.

Environmental and Systemic Barriers to Pursuing Postsecondary Education for Young African American Men From Single Parent Households

by

Felix A. Weston

MSW, University of South Carolina, 2014

BS, Benedict College, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work

Walden University

May 2025

Dedication

I dedicate this study to GOD, first and foremost, as HE is the Author and Finisher of my faith and this work. I also dedicate this study to my mother and my grandfather who are both with the LORD, and who instilled in me the passion for writing.

Acknowledgments

To GOD be All the Glory.

To my family: Thank you for supporting me in this journey.

To my chair, Dr. Debra Wilson, and committee member, Dr Curtis Davis, and to Dr. Sunday Fakunmoju: I am deeply thankful to you all for your guidance and support during this journey.

To the young men who participated in this study. Thank you for sharing your valuable stories with me.

To all my PhD and DSW mentors, social work colleagues, faculty support, friends, and everyone who took this journey with me, I am truly indebted to you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Racism and structural inequalities within the school system and society are often linked with alienation of the African American male students (T. R. Buckley, 2018; Ellis et al., 2018). Moreover, perceptions that there are low expectations and lack of support to ensure their educational experience and material relevant to their culture, contribute as a barrier during high school years (C. E. James, 2019). Fewer African Americans are seeking postsecondary education than European Americans due to lack of aspirations, because of low-finances, lack of knowledge regarding the college and university admission process, and educational preparation (Schneider & Saw, 2016). Socioeconomic disadvantages, racial marginalization, and an educational system that has very little representation of the African American history, culture, or heritage experiences gives way that posits a belief that African Americans, men in particular, are inferior to receiving a postsecondary education as evidenced by being undervalued in U.S. society (Allen,2017).

Nojan (2020) argued that if this phenomenon continues to exist, and if not properly addressed through social change efforts, the United States will continue to undervalue education and equalities as it relates to ethnic cultures and minorities (Nojan, 2020). The daily experiences that African American young adult men face in past and current social conditions of the country are often displayed through an intersection of barriers that are often viewed through depictions as being disadvantaged, violent and marginalized. According to Gaylord-Harden et al. (2018), African American men have been associated with experiencing vulnerabilities such as low educational expectations,

aggression, and economic disadvantages, which could be attributed to low socioeconomic status, poverty, and racial identity internal discord (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018).

In this study, I explored environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, between the ages of 18 and 24 from single parent households and their perception in pursuing a postsecondary education. I further highlight sections of the topic in greater detail as it relates to African American men, the educational system, teacher and administrative perceptions, and the ecological systemic barriers, specifically highlighting micro, meso, and macrosystems of the ecological model of systems theory. In the current times that the country is facing with social justice, political views, and most recently the narrative enveloping critical race theory and the spirited discussions of whether it is appropriate to teach elementary-school aged children African American history, there is no greater time than now to parse, unpack and dissect the current education system in the United States as it relates to social change implications. The time is now, that we begin to reimagine a society, where we begin to adapt and adjust our educational system to meet the needs of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, understanding that how we learn may differ from mainstream society, especially as it relates to African American men.

Background

Many qualitative research scholars have explored research as it relates to the topic of African American men, utilizing critical theory, ethnographic studies, and counseling models (Hines et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Minor, 2021). Similar studies focus on the Black male perspective in regard to person-centered education within urban

alternative schools where there remains a concern of cultural school environments that lacks support of school reform initiatives and person-centered environments for African American men (Burt et al., 2019; Slaten et al., 2016). Although this research is important, there is limited research as it relates to exploring the perspectives of African American men from single parent households through the lens of the ecological model of systems theory, with specific attention to the micro, meso, and macro perspectives.

African American boys are subjected to disproportionate disciplinary practices and are over-represented in remedial classes, due to limited social support and structural economic and social barriers (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Roy et al., 2019). Despite these barriers, research shows that single parents can overcome these barriers that often portray them as uninformed and uninterested as it relates to their children's education (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Almond et al., 2021; Danforth & Miller, 2018). This research highlights systemic concerns at the macro (school) level, which may shed light on policies that are potential barriers for African American male students, as well as providing information for single parent families as it relates to supportive efforts that could be provided to assist their children with continuing education post-high school (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Brooms, 2017).

There has been research focused on the social and academic experiences of nontraditional African American male undergraduates attending an HBCU and their experiences as it relates to succeeding in college (Goings, 2016; Knight et al., 2019). Much of the research that has been found supports first generation college students, students from predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and students from specialized

degree programs (Hines et al., 2019; Huerta et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2019). Consequently, there is a further need for studies that discuss conversations regarding racial experiences in educational constructs when conducting qualitative studies highlighting the perspective of African American men.

According to Powell (2018), African American men at the high school levels' academic success has significantly improved due to strong support, positive self-concepts, and community involvement. In reviewing this research literature and previous articles, much attention has been provided to African American students at the middle to late high school levels and college levels (C. E. James, 2019; Hackett et al., 2018; Powell, 2018), but there remains a consistent gap in the current research literature as it relates to African American men ages 18–24 who are currently unenrolled in college or postsecondary education.

Understanding how African American men at HBCUs and other institutions of higher learning are of extreme importance and there is need for continued research to support the academic success of African American men. Markedly, despite some of the academic challenges they experience, research has found that family support and mentorship was critical to academic success (Allen, 2018; Almond et al., 2021; Irvine, 2019). In looking at building upon this data, notably incorporating strength-based support and interventions into the school systems, qualitative data can be obtained from the perspectives of African American men who are not currently enrolled in college who may have lacked support but may have new ideas that can provide knowledge as it relates to being motivated and supported to seek postsecondary education.

Educational experiences of Black men have also been explored in an urban "no excuse" charter school specifically designed for Black male students who were labeled high risk or struggling academically, along with their perceptions of their school experiences (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). In this and subsequent studies, negative systemic beliefs of African American men, may play a role in shaping European American educators' inherent perceptions that African American men are unruly and unfairly categorized as "at risk" and therefore deemed to be labeled as unsuccessful in school, whether the school was a charter school or PWI (Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Negrete & Hurd, 2020). The need for a qualitative study addressing African American men's perspective is important for this study, in order to highlight their experiences of choosing not to seek postsecondary education.

Research posits that African American college students who are enrolled at predominately White institutions will progress if they work hard, regardless of race or color (Reynolds et al., 2021). This belief of meritocracy does not consider the barriers of structural oppression that African American men may experience as it relates to the systemic obstacles that they encounter (Goings, 2016; Negrete & Hurd, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2021). Although the research is important as it relates to African American students entering college, there has been limited research relating to African American men between the ages of 18 and 24, who have been raised in single parent homes who are currently unenrolled in postsecondary education. This phenomenon is important to research, as it supports a gap in the literature from a qualitative perspective that seeks to

explore experiences of African American men who have trepidation or lack the desire to pursue postsecondary education.

Researchers have also examined the intersection of gender role and racial identity associated with self-concepts among Black male adolescents (Ellis et al., 2018; Szkody, 2021). Additionally, African American men are often negatively typecast as underachieving and threatening, and this construct is often perpetuated by media outlets and psychological research studies (Allen & Smith, 2018; T. R. Buckley, 2018; Grace, 2019). The assertions are that these structural formations are intricately intertwined within the dynamics of the educational system and can have negative impacts on the identity of Black male adolescents (Ellis et al., 2018; C. E. James, 2019).

Similarly, cultural influences can be a contributing factor that informs self-concept, consequently, causing internal mainstream stereotypes from a societal construct that may contribute to a lack of interest and low engagement in the context of academic achievement for African American men (T. R. Buckley, 2018). Although researchers have investigated this issue from the statistical and numerical data from current African American students, there is little research that explores general qualitative studies from recent high school African American graduates. This further supports a gap in the literature in relations to African American men ages 18 to 24 raised in single parent homes, and barriers that may hinder the pursuit of postsecondary education.

Negative perceptions of African American male students as it relates to social, academic, and institutional structures may act as barriers during traditional public-school years, potentially serving as a factor regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, which

systemically asserts that African American men are more apt for prison than higher education (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Harris et al., 2021). This notion may further add to some of the frustrations of young African American men and their beliefs of seeking postsecondary education. More recent literature has related to critical race theory and how the systematic dynamics of racism in schools and poor teacher expectations of African American students hinder their beliefs of excelling at the postsecondary level (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Comeaux et al 2020; Grace & Nelson, 2019). Additionally, racism being embedded within societal constructs is often overlooked, therefore asserting an "invisible" barrier that is often inherent within the public school system as it relates to African American men (Allen, 2017; Allen, 2020). As mentioned in previous summaries, systems theory may provide additional insight and new knowledge to the current literature as it relates to the African American man and the educational system (Burt, 2018; Orrock & Clark, 2018).

This research focused on the strengths of the African American men rather than deficits and highlighted the importance of family, school, and the environment from a systems theory perspective, to not only empower African American male students advancing in education but inform academic staff and educators the usefulness of the ecological model of systems theory when working with at-risk and marginalized populations (Burt, 2018; Orrock & Clark, 2018). This research is important to the study, as it is relevant to the research of exploring African American men who have yet to attend college, as well as provide new knowledge from a qualitative perspective from

groups of African American men who are undecided or have decided against pursuing postsecondary education.

In summary, by exploring perspectives of African American men from single parent households from the lens of the ecological model of systems theory, we can learn new knowledge of how parental involvement, family support, educational support, financial support, and the overarching societal support of the life course can influence the success of the African American man holistically. This research also lends to fill gaps in knowledge by conducting qualitative studies of African American men not in High School, whereas much of the research has been previously conducted at the middle-school level, predominately White institutions, and with first generation college students (Hines et al., 2019; Huerta et al., 2018; C. E. James, 2019; Nojan, 2020). Additionally, researchers have conducted quantitative studies utilizing statistical and numerical data from cross-sectional studies (Gale, 2020; Lateef et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a gap in knowledge related to studies that specifically focus on gaining insight from a qualitative perspective on African American men from 18 to 24 years of age who have not pursued postsecondary education.

Lastly, researchers have utilized ethnography, critical race theory, and case study methods in gathering data of African American men (Brooms, 2015; Hines et al., 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Minor, 2021), but there is a gap and lack of research utilizing the ecological model of systems theory, specifically to gain insight from African American men not currently enrolled in college, and how their views and perceptions have influenced them not to attend college or have trepidation on attending college. This

research not only provides new knowledge but seeks to address societal concerns that may attempt to silence the voice and history of African American's. This research is important in order to continue to understand and improve African American men from single parent homes with limited resources, who may potentially benefit from an improved school system and improved neighborhood environment that will allow the African American man to thrive, not only in education, but through all facets of livelihood.

Problem Statement

The education inequalities that young adult African American men face in past and current social conditions of the country are highlighted through an intersection of systemic barriers that are often displayed through economical disadvantages, social and academic deficits, and at-risk violent behaviors (Orrock & Clark, 2018). According to Gaylord-Harden et al. (2018), African American men have been associated with experiencing vulnerabilities such as low educational expectations, aggression, and economic disadvantages, which could be attributed to low socioeconomic status, poverty, and racial identity internal discord. African American men ages 18 to 24 represented only 36.4% of postsecondary college enrollment against 42.1% of European Americans (Schneider & Saw, 2016). Moreover, limited educational and economic opportunities for African American youth often contribute to participating in nonproductive and negative behaviors which is often due to lack of resources and social support (Roy et al., 2019; D. E. Thomas et al., 2021).

According to Nojan (2020), research education inequalities regarding African American students, highlights that less than 20% of African Americans ages 25–35 are graduating from postsecondary institutions, which posits the importance of conducting this study. African American men are ranked lower in reading, math, and scores measuring academic proficiency than any other race or ethnic group (Griffin et al., 2021; National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d). As well, African American men have more difficulties in navigating kindergarten through Grade 12 than their European American counterparts (Appling & Robinson, 2021; M. C. James et al., 2022).

Although researchers have investigated this issue from economic and educational standpoints as it relates to education degrees (Richardson et al., 2019), and college African American male students as it relates to gender and masculinity (Allan (2020), there is limited research on young adult African American men raised in single parent homes between the ages of 18 and 24 who are currently unenrolled in college or postsecondary schools. Moreover, the understandings of African American men pursuing a college education after high school from a systems theory perspective is limited in research. According to Orrock and Clark (2018), social and environmental conditions play a significant role in understanding how environment, school, and family are interconnected from a micro and macrosystems theory construct (Orrock & Clark, 2018).

As a result of this research, this study filled an identified gap in knowledge and research by highlighting how 18–24-year-old African American men from single parent households' make meaning of pursuing a postsecondary education, with specific attention to the microsystem and macrosystems. Marsh and Noguera (2018) posited that Black or

African American men are disproportionately represented as academic risks of failing in school and socially constructed as deviant. This research is important in relationship to my study as this may provide somewhat of an understanding where African American men who may be labeled by their teachers, feel isolated and excluded from the school environment, which may disrupt the students learning capacity to advance within the school environment. Towards that end, the microsystems influence social work practice in identifying the person in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). The environment generally consists of the immediate family, and how the person responds to the environment in the bioecological model, now known as the ecological model of systems theory. The macrosystem level involves policies and procedures which govern on a larger systemic scale, such as schools, and city and state government.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, of single parent households ages 18–24, in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education in Columbia, South Carolina. For this research study, a qualitative method was conducted utilizing in-depth interviews to understand from the perspective of the participants, the environmental and systemic barriers of pursuing postsecondary education. Towards that end, as a scholar–practitioner and advocate for social change, I chose this study to highlight the voices of African American men who have not attended college possibly due to the belief of "college is not for me" mentality. In 2022, one area from where the research for this study was conducted, the school districts' graduation cohort of college-readiness students was 4.5%

at a school with predominately African American students (South Carolina Report Card, n.d.).

In the same district, a school with predominately European American students, the graduation cohort of college-readiness students was 42.1% (South Carolina School Report Card, n.d.). Moreover, research states that with the future of the country's economic condition, there will be a greater need for students that are college-ready (Hines et al., 2020). To better understand these figures from a qualitative perspective, it is possible that many African American men would be successful in college if their voices were heard on their trepidation, or any barriers encountered as it relates to obtaining a postsecondary education. It is important for this study to be done so that their voices could be amplified through their own words, which may provide insight on the experience of the Black young man in considering and pursuing postsecondary education.

Research Question

How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that was utilized to conduct this study derived from systems theory. In continuing to research the literature, there seems to be a considerable amount of research relating to critical race theory and critical consciousness (Allen, 2019; Comeaux et al 2020; Nojan, 2020). However, there seems to be a lack of literature on the African American man in relationship to the system and social environment. Towards

that end, systems theory posits developing a holistic framework where the individual is understood through the interactions of the social environment as it relates to groups, communities, and social structures (Robbins et al., 2012).

In relationship to the systems theory with the focus on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of systems theory, the micro-, meso-, and macrosystems constitute a potential framework of alignment relating to the African American man and the interaction with various levels of the environment and system (Pallan et al., 2012). In understanding the African American perspective, it is important to include the micro and macrosystem construct as a dynamic, especially as it relates to economic resources, rural areas with a lack of financial resources, and limited academic resources at the macro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In order to improve upon social change and self-worth, this research is important to conduct from a qualitative perspective when seeking to understand how African American men ages 18–24 raised by single parents experience barriers to pursuing postsecondary education in relation to the micro-, meso-, and macro-systems.

Nature of the Study

The study phenomenon was the systemic barriers to pursuing postsecondary education faced by African American men ages 18–24 from single parent households in Columbia, South Carolina. To address the phenomenon, I conducted a general qualitative study. The study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to capture rich thick descriptions from the perspectives of the men that were interviewed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interviews are appropriate to conduct in alignment with exploratory qualitative

research. According to Jacob and Ferguson (2012), interviewing provides platforms to gather information from the perspectives of the participants as it relates to how they make meaning of their world or phenomenon (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). This would be important to this study. The sampling was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling posits as inclusion of a specific sample of participants with predetermined criteria of African American men between the ages of 18 and 24 raised in single parent households in Columbia, South Carolina (Guest et al., 2006).

With regard to threats to validity and reliability, this concept would be comparable to trustworthiness and credibility when involved with qualitative research (Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell, 2019). To remain in alignment and improve trustworthiness and credibility, I sought rich thick descriptive interview data and engaged in additional methods such as member checks and peer debriefing (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell, 2009).

Definitions

The following terms are essential to capturing much of the focus for this research study:

African American man: For the purpose of this study, an individual who identifies as Black, African American, of African descent, or African.

Environmental barriers: For the purpose of this study, community and neighborhood factors that influence and may act as barriers for African American men; more specifically, the barriers relate to safety, health outcomes, poverty, employment, and violence.

Macrosystems: The overarching system that influences the micro- and mesosystems from a larger systematic construct, such as local government, school administration, city government, and potentially larger political governments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Mesosystems: An interrelation construct between at least two settings, where the individual person interacts actively within a defined space or set of spaces. An example of the mesosystem as it relates to the African American man would be the home interaction and/or the school interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Microsystems: A combination of duties, roles, and patterns within an interpersonal microcosm that the individual person experiences with specific attention to environmental and physical characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Postsecondary education: The third level of formal education immediately after the secondary level, with secondary level being high school, and postsecondary level being any 1–2-year technical or vocational school, 4-year college, and/or master's-level advanced degrees and/or terminal degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d).

Single parents: A household led by one woman or one man with no spouse or partner present in the home (e.g., the homeowner or occupant is not married or does not have a live-in partner; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d).

Systemic barriers: For the purposes of this study, inequalities that are embedded within social, local, and governmental institutions such as the educational system, economic system, health care system, and governmental agencies.

Assumptions

Assumptions from a qualitative perspective are based upon how someone's interaction with the social world is experienced or interpreted (Burkholder et al., 2016). While conducting this qualitative research, I assumed that participants' responses accurately represented their understanding of their phenomenon and world (see Babbie, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). One of the assumptions from this research study was that the African American men were truthful to the interview questions. Additionally, the assumption was that the African American men gained insight as to potentially seeking out postsecondary education. Lastly, there was the assumption that after this research, some of the participants may choose not to seek postsecondary education.

Scope and Delimitations

I gathered the data for this study by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews of African American men between the ages of 18 and 24 from single parent households in Columbia, South Carolina. The participant sample size for the research were 15 participants for the interviews. When conducting a general qualitative study in alignment with qualitative research, some research shows that the sample size should be no more than 15 participants, with the majority of saturation achieved between eight and 12 participants (Guest et al., 2006). Criteria for selecting the participants involved in this qualitative study were that participants were African American men between the ages of 18 and 24 who have resided in single family homes. Study participants were recruited from within the north part of Columbia, South Carolina. Recruiting the participants was conducted through local flyers, engaging civic and community leaders, and identifying

single family housing complexes. Participants were provided with voluntary informed consent forms and information regarding confidentiality.

Limitations

As an African American man, understanding my biases and beliefs is critical for this research to be credible and trustworthy. Continued reflection and reducing my input and beliefs was paramount in order to gain the true perspectives of the participants. Ravitch and Carl (2016) posited that continuously maintaining the understanding that the participants are the experts in their meanings and understandings of their phenomenon, and utilizing the concept of coresearcher and co-collaboration, can assist with reducing hierarchy and maintaining credibility and trustworthiness in data collection. Additionally, utilizing member checks was used to improve credibility (Burkholder et al., 2016). As an African American, understanding that my relationship is closely tied to my study, posited me to utilize reflective journals and field notes where I constantly refer to and address and eliminate as much bias as possible.

Significance

The significance of this study lends towards the phenomenon of educational and structural inequalities that African Americans experience as it relates to inequality in education (Brooms & Davis, 2017). This study contributed a meaningful significance to the research body of literature by describing in greater detail educational inequalities, racial inequalities, and additional barriers that may exist among African American families during high school years. This may shed light upon improving school involvement and increase college enrollment (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). This study

hopes to bring awareness and social change implications that will bridge the equality gap of education and ensure that all cultures, races, and populations are afforded equal educational opportunities in society. Moreover, disproportionate rates of college enrollment, for non-White Americans, further contribute to not only an achievement gap, but also an educational value gap (Hines et al., 2020).

This educational value gap in educational systems limits ethnic curriculums, specifically for African American men. Consequently, the lack of African American academic contributions and representations in the current educational system curriculum may make it difficult for African American men to be motivated to advance in academics (Nojan, 2020). College preparation in high school as well as access to critical resources such as admission standards, SAT preparation resources, and exposure to college-ready courses also contribute as a significant concern (Knight-Manual et al., 2019).

Some research suggests that microaggressions and institutional racial ideologies and influences within institutional policies may neglect the African American perspective even at postgraduate level (Burt et al., 2018). Conducting this study may shed light on these concerns that could lead to positive social change. Moreover, by emphasizing the deficits that are prevalent while reviewing the literature, conducting this research may promote opportunities for strength-based programs that can support racial equality and dispel myths of inferiority as it relates to African American men ages 18–24 pursuing postsecondary education.

Summary

Chapter 1, Introduced the study, the background, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance. This research focused on the strengths of the African American men rather than deficits and highlighted the importance of family, school, and the environment from a systems theory perspective, to not only empower African American male students advancing in education but inform academic staff and educators the usefulness of the ecological model of systems theory when working with at-risk and marginalized populations (Orrock & Clark, 2018). This research is important to the study, as it is relevant to research of exploring African American men who have yet to attend college, as well as provide new knowledge from a qualitative perspective from groups of African American men who are undecided or have decided against pursuing postsecondary education. To investigate this research study, a general qualitative research method was conducted. In Chapter 2, I will provide a review of the current literature about the research question and problem. Additionally, the theoretical framework will be discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter 2 begins the process of reviewing the current literature as it relates to the research of exploring the environmental and systemic barriers that African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households' experience in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. This chapter will entail a review of past and recent literature, as well as a synthesizing of the literature within the context of the research conducted. Moreover, in Chapter 2 I will look at findings and conclusions from previous scholars and researchers, and to support this writers' identified gap in the literature and the need for this study. This chapter will also include specific sections relating to post-secondary enrollment, environmental barriers as well as systemic barriers. Lastly, this chapter will delve further into the microsystems and macrosystems of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of systems theory.

Literature Search Strategy

I used Walden University Library databases to access literature for the review. The databases searched included Academic Search Complete, APA PsycInfo, APA PsyArticles, Thoreau, SocINDEX with Full Text, Social Work Abstracts, EBSCOhost, Education Source, and ERIC. The key terms of the search included *African American males*, *African Americans*, *Black males*, *Black men*, *college*, *colleges*, *ecological model of systems theory*, *systems theory*, *environmental factors*, *environmental barriers*, *systemic factors*, *systemic barriers*, *education*, *high school*, *secondary school*, *postsecondary*

education, *postsecondary college*, *universities*, *historically Black colleges and universities*, *single parent households*, and *single parents*.

Theoretical Foundation

In this section, I will highlight seminal research of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of systems theory and some of its background. Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that each individual person and their background of understanding can be essentially tied to the environment and the systematic structure surrounding it. His principal assertion was that a person's behavior is influenced by how the person interacts with the environment surrounding them and how external factors contribute to the person's characteristics, rather than being constructed through a systematic/social construct such as race. In quantitative research, many theorists utilize objectivity and hypothesis to determine social factors and behavior in people (R. Buckley, 2018; Ellis et al., 2018; Powell, 2018), but there is a limited amount of research that denotes general qualitative research as it relates to the person in environment.

I chose systems theory as the framework with particular attention to the micro-, meso-, and macro- perspective due to the deeper ecological framework that will attribute to the person-in-environment, rather than the characteristics of the person's behavior, positive or negative (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Moreover, I also chose ecological model of systems theory, due to the specific nature of capturing the person-in-environment construct, while highlighting how the systematic structure of societal government, laws, mandates, and educational bureaucracy can potentially play a huge role in how the

African American culture, specifically as it relates to men are misrepresented and underrepresented in the school educational system (Slaten et al., 2016).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

African American Men

African American men, in particular young adult men, experience barriers that are often discredited and regulated to being seen as disobedient, have low expectations, and lack motivation to succeed (Brooms, Clark, & Druery, 2021; Carey, 2022; Orrock & Clark, 2018). Current research consistently posits the African American men experience life through a lens of deficit perspective through social inequalities and racism (Harris et al., 2021; Hines et al., 2020). Research that has been conducted reveals that African American men are more significantly likely to reside in low-income single parent households in low socioeconomic situations with limited resources, causing poor academic engagement (Danforth & Miller, 2018; Fletcher & Moore, 2021; D. E. Thomas et al., 2021).

Much of the research that has been collected from this writer highlights behavioral deficits and social deficits, and not from a strengths or environmental perspective. Moreover, many researchers utilize critical race theory as a theoretical framework, and quantitative study as the research method (Danforth & Miller, 2017; Reynolds-Vassar et al., 2021), and through lenses of social and gender theory (Davis & Friedman (2021). However, there is a lack of research exploring systems theory from a qualitative perspective that addresses the experiences and perceptions of African American young adult men and how they make meaning of their living phenomenon.

African Americans as a whole are severely underrepresented in postsecondary colleges and universities and has been decreasing over the past few years (D'orio, 2022; Hines et al., 2020). In 2017, only 18% of African American students ages 18–25 years of age possessed a postsecondary or bachelor's degree in relation to 36% of European American men receiving their postsecondary degrees (Adams, Williams, & Lewis, 2020; Minor et al., 2017). In postsecondary undergraduate institutions across the United States, 8,500,000 were European American, and 2,100,000 were African American, and in an additional study, less than 5% of the African American college population of students were enrolled in a 4-year college (Danforth & Miller, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d).

In a separate, but compelling area comparing African American women to African American men and enrollment at an HBCU, more women have been enrolled in HBCUs than men since 1976 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). In researching additional data on African American men and women, African American men achieve lower than satisfactory grades in middle and high schools, which contributes to lower college enrollment rates and matriculation (Harris, 2018).

Research further posits that African American men are often pressured by their peers and by stereotypical masculine social constructs, such as being "too White", or "Blacks are better at sports and music than reading or writing", which may play a significant role in the notion or desire to pursue higher academic education (Kunjufu, 1988; Harris, 2018). This deficit way of thinking is included in many research and literature journals from a risk statistics and quantitative standpoint (Gale, 2020; Lateef et

al., 2022). In contrast, research should be conducted using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews to understand the true perceptions and experiences of African American men and how they make meaning of their individual academic experiences.

In a seminal study, Dr. Kwanza Kungfu's research in 1979, suggests that African American men are not motivated in schools due to the lack of relevancy and motivation in the school curriculum, which sorely lacks the African American perspective, other than slavery (Kunjufu, 1985). In looking at the data from a holistic perspective, lends towards the question of how African American men experience their perceptions of school and if it truly prepares them for postsecondary education. Although education for African American men have improved greatly From Kungfu's research in 1979 towards today's times, there remains inequalities in supporting African American boys in grade school or preparing African American male adolescents for postsecondary education.

According to Huerta et al. (2018), the societal perception and preparation is more focused on the grave injustices of providing more highlights on the construct of tracking the "school-to-prison-pipeline" which often focuses on the plight of African American men heading to prison rather than college. Towards that end, a qualitative study of the environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, ages 18–24 as they relate to pursuing a postsecondary education may be important and meaningful. By learning from the perspectives of African American men themselves, this research may promote positive social change by highlighting ways to improve the school system.

It is imperative that educators learn to incorporate cultural and social contexts within the classroom and make connections with the family, particularly those families

with limited learning resources outside of the school (Allen & White-Smith; Short, 2018). Towards that end, taking a closer look at the African America family from the single-family perspective with specific attention to the African American man may shed light on what transpires from an educational standpoint in the home (Gilfillan et al., 2021). Research further suggests that schoolteachers and counselors should focus more on deep social cultures and how African American men learn, rather than focusing on a surface understanding of African American culture and societal deficits (Appling & Robinson; Harris et al; Short, 2018).

Single Parent Households

There is often a negative connation when speaking of single parent households. However, many successful persons from single parent homes, whether college graduates or not, have contributed to society in a positive way (Gilfilan et al., 2021). But oftentimes, many single parent households in urban communities, lack the support and resources to provide the best educational opportunities for their children, especially as it relates to young African American men (Huerta et al., 2018). Many single parents often work two or three jobs, and have little to no social or financial support, which may make it difficult to adequately prepare or support their children's aspiration for college (Huerta et al; 2018; Szkody et al., 2021).

Moreover, from a lens of intersectionality, or intersecting roads of identities such as being an African American and a woman or man, lends towards highlighting economic differences from a European American single parent home (Carey, 2022; Danforth & Miller, 2018). From the perspective of economic and social capital, support for

postsecondary education after high school is often more achievable as European American families tend to have more economic and social support from extended family, friends, trust funds, and inheritances, increasing the likelihood of attending college or an institution of higher learning (Huerta et al., 2018; Szkody et al., 2021). A recent study showed that 67% of young African American men reside in single-mother led homes, which can increase risk factors of underachieving due to economic concerns and low instances of parent-child interaction due to the parent having to work multiple jobs (Danforth & Miller, 2018). Additionally, adverse childhood experiences can be more prevalent in low-income African American adolescents, which may be a contributing factor in compromising the health of the family, thereby hindering positive support due to emotional, mental, and physical distress (Kliewer & Robins, 2022).

Positive parental involvement is very important in supporting African American men in their aspirations to pursue postsecondary education (Allen & Smith, 2018; Carey, 2022; Danforth & Miller, 2018). Moreover, exploring parental support and involvement, studies report that greater parental support at the primary school levels positively increases the chances of the students seeking postsecondary aspirations (Gilfilan, 2021). Recent studies in the current literature of a school survey called Parental Involvement During High School Survey, a questionnaire on parent involvement in school-aged children's lives and how this construct plays a part in support and network of men attending a 4-year college suggest that further research would be beneficial by conducting a study such as this with high school students (Smith et al., 2021). Based on this research, I argue that conducting a qualitative study with African American young adults in a

single parent home will be beneficial as they may shed light from their perspective due to the richness of in-depth interviews.

Postsecondary Education

Obtaining a college education or any postsecondary education is important for many persons to experience a successful and profitable living, specifically for African American men (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Many African American men are not afforded this experience, due to negative misconceptions of African American men being labeled as "learning deficient" and lacking academic motivation even before they enter high school (Allen, 2017; Gaylord et al., 2018). According to Hines et al. (2020), African American men are placed higher into intermediate or special education courses at a higher rate in the middle-grade level and lack in sufficient resources to prepare them for higher education. Additionally, as it relates to high schools, national aptitude tests such as the ACT posits that African American men are less likely to have access to college-ready courses and are less prepared for colleges compared to their European American counterparts (Hines et al., 2020). As an indicator, the low enrollment rate of African American men in advanced placement courses and the low college attending rates supports an unhealthy learning environment thereby hindering academic success (Chan et al., 2021).

Moreover, according to Cain and Trauth (2022), African Americans have been underrepresented in the college recruitment process and thereby limits the diversity in many postsecondary settings (Cain & Trauth, 2022). Towards that end, it is imperative for teachers and administrators to provide and support resources, such as precollege

initiatives that will bring exposure and access for African American students to ponder the thought of obtaining a postsecondary education (Goings & Sewell, 2019). Additionally, according to Brooms (2021b), trust and relationships between teacher–student and/or counselor–student can have a positive impact with regard to pursuing or thinking about pursuing postsecondary education (see also Cain & Trauth, 2022). Furthermore, positive and trusting relationships with peers can further improve student engagement and a higher probability of seeking advanced education (Bumbacco & Scharfe, 2022). Moreover, research suggests that having associates or friends who are currently enrolled in postsecondary education may be beneficial for African American male students who may not otherwise have associations with college-aged peers (Alvarado, 2021). In conducting a general qualitative study, school officials, researchers, and advocates can hear the perspectives of African American men in order to understand any relational associations with college-aged students.

Aspirations for African American men and achieving higher education has often been overshadowed by negative statistics. African American men represent a higher statistic of the prison population, victims of gun violence, and unemployment than their European American counterparts (Cochran-Jackson, 2022). In contrast, in higher education and enrollment, African American men represent 4% less than other races (Alvarado, 2021; Cochran-Jackson, 2022). Essentially, while many African American men do indeed enroll in postsecondary education successfully, many have often already been exposed to stressors and trauma from their environment, which make the transition to college difficult and in more disparaging cases, deter them from even considering

college or alternative postsecondary education, such as community colleges, which have less stringent requirements (Allen, 2017; Bell & Gandara, 2021; Ellis, 2018).

Furthermore, although many African Americans enroll in postsecondary education, they often trail other races. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), college enrollment rates for 2019 were at 37% for African Americans, 41% for European Americans, and 64% for Asians (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). According to Carey (2022), limited educational resources, low-income environments, and excessive discipline due to an overabundance of hyper surveillance often negates the aspirations of seeking postsecondary education for young African Americans men (Carey, 2022). Moreover, many postsecondary institutions lack the cultural supportive services for African American students, which may cause a barrier between the institutions and the necessary services that African Americans require to be successful in achieving higher education (Helling & Chandler, 2021; Hines et al 2020; Webster & Knaus, 2020).

Although these statistics are useful, there is a lack of research that addresses the reasons and perceptions that African American men who have either not attended college by choice or if any environmental or systemic barriers that they may have experienced in attempting to seek higher education was present. This qualitative study seeks to include the narratives of African American men who are not enrolled in any college setting. In qualitative studies that utilize interviews, many researchers address first generation students and/or Black men in college (Cochran-Jackson, 2022; Hines et al., 2020). Moreover, Adams et al. (2020), research further looks at early college institutions that

prepare first generation African American students for college and utilized a qualitative perspective on their experiences (Adams et al., 2020). There is a considerable lack of research on African American men who are not attending any postsecondary educational institution, college, or university. Towards that end, there is a meaningful need for qualitative studies to identify and highlight the perceptions and possible reasons that African American men in this category have not sought postsecondary education.

Teachers' and School Counselors' Perceptions of African American Men

Perceptions of African American men and their ability to succeed in middle and high school may have a distinct connection on how African American men are viewed in the classrooms by teachers or school counselors of a different race (Danforth & Miller, 2018; Huerta et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2020). Additionally, the intersectionality of race and gender can lead to negative generalized perceptions that African American men are less likely to be successful in postsecondary education because of social system restraints and misconceptions hindering the educational success (Cage et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019).

The lack of teacher diversity in public schools often suggest systematic concern within the educational system, with training being one point of concern for teachers of non-African descent (Ryan et al., 2022). Some research observations posit that European American teachers or teachers of non-African descent inherently believe that African American students are less than qualified to perform at a high education level (Childs, 2019; Nelson et al., 2020; Reynolds-Vassar et al., 2021). European American teachers may have preconceived views of African American men, as being less enthused about

education and/or more suited for blue-collar work due to societal misconceptions that are embedded with the educational system (Harris et al., 2021). Subsequently, this negative underlying belief from teachers, counselors, and so forth may contribute to an internal victimization mindset from African American men, in which they take "ownership" of negative behaviors and problems, and act as such in the classroom, where they limit their efforts, as they believe that they are less than capable of performing (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Huerta et al., 2018).

African American men at the middle school level are often not placed in academically challenging courses, due to a systematic belief that African American men are not equipped to perform in higher level courses (C. E. James, 2019; Nojan, 2020). Consequently, this construct further restricts academic rigor and hinders the opportunity for continued educational success at the high school level. This may lessen the possibility for success at the college or postsecondary education level (Reynolds-Vassar et al., 2021).

Towards that end, recruiting and retaining African American teachers can make learning a more celebrated environment where African American students, specifically men can identify with and see representations of themselves. According to Childs (2019), there are approximately 82.7% of European American teachers as opposed to 6.4% of African American teachers (Childs, 2019). To effectively reconstruct and improve the educational trajectory of African American students, society must incorporate proper cultural humility/sensitive training to teachers and faculty of those who are not of African American or minority descent, which can build and sustain mutual

trust within the community, as well as the school environment improving educational outcomes for African American men (Nelson et al., 2020).

School administrators, faculty, and staff can become ally's and assets for African American men from single parent homes who may have trepidation and lack the belief that they can be successful in college (Minor et al., 2021). Additionally, and especially in high schools, having counselors and administration staff who have a vested effort in helping African American families navigate the college process and employ in each student, that they have the potential to pursue postsecondary education is imperative (Goings & Sewell, 2019).

Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2000) ecological systems theory can be defined as a complex set of systems that functions relationally by interactions of the family and its environment (see also Wasche et al., 2021). Moreover, regarding the environmental context of the ecological model of systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that mutual reciprocity occurs when the person benefits from each layer of the interactions within the systems, such as the micro-, meso-, and macro-. For the purpose of this section, the microsystem and macrosystem will be discussed as it relates to the African American man.

As it relates to educational success, society does not often equate the systemic structure of the family and the environment as a contributing factor to success in schools. Hackett et al. (2018) posited that the environmental and institutional construct of the educational system supports a disproportionate achievement gap where African American

students are not afforded equal access and opportunity as it relates to their academic progress. This not only hinders progress at the microsystem and mesosystem, but restricts progress throughout the additional systems, promoting additional barriers. According to M. C. James et al. (2022), the African American man's hesitancy and lack of trust begins with the systems that are in place which often prohibits environmental growth and systemic growth. Many African American men find it difficult to succeed at the high school levels, due to negative educational and societal barriers within the school years (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Burt et al., 2018; M. C. James et al., 2022). To improve upon this construct, positive social factors such as marital status, college education, and financial wellness of the parent contributes to a stronger micro and mesosystem and likelihood of increased chances of seeking postsecondary education (Gilfilan, 2021).

This construct is paramount when assessing a child's relational and educational well-being. Having positive relational support from parents and teachers often lead to a nurturing home and education experience for African American men (Adams, Williams, & Lewis, 2020). Moreover, the relationships between a parent and the child should be positive and rooted in love and support in order for the child to become a healthy adult (Almond et al., 2021). When that function is lacking or missing, discord or disruption with outside social relationships can be caused, and more importantly, a hinderance to the best opportunity for a successful educational experience in schools; due to a lack of support from their home environment (Almond et al., 2021). As an example, African

American men who are absent of a father may present with a natural sense of loss and lack of guidance.

With an already damaged social system, the young African American man may experience negative cognitive and emotional processes, thereby hindering self-esteem (T. R. Buckley, 2018; Orrock & Clark, 2018). It is therefore important, that be it a single mother or father rearing a child, their hopes must be nurtured and stimulated for growth for education. Moreover, according to Robinson's (2021) study, being a single father, raised in a single parent household, required the father to have a greater motivation to pursue a postsecondary education to provide a positive example for his own son, providing him with the hope that he can one day pursue a postsecondary education (Robinson, 2021).

A healthy relationship between a parent and the child has tendencies of being holistically positive and grounded in love and support for the child to have the best opportunity for a successful educational experience in school (Almond et al., 2021). When that function is lacking, room for outside discord and/or disruption (macrosystem) within outside social relationships may occur, causing a disconnection in the system. The interactions of the didactic parent-child relationships seem to be initial factors that can negatively influence a child's environment, such as school, if not supported.

The educational system from the macro standpoint posits structural inequalities from the construct of the perceived achievement gap of African American men, where they are subsequently compared to the academic achievement of European Americans and does not consider the rigid testing and educational curriculum that supports a mostly

Eurocentric learning system (Reynolds-Vassar et al., 2021). Within the interaction of the macro environment where school policies and procedures are highlighted, there is more negative grounds asserting disciplinary proceedings and expulsion reviews towards African American men, possibly due to the concept of the 'pipeline to prison" construct, which enforces negative barriers and supports a perceived invisible barrier for African American men in their aspirations for college (Huerta et al., 2018). It is therefore important that this qualitative research study is conducted where we can hear and understand the voices of African American men, who may be well-informed to provide their own narrative of their experiences as it relates to grade school and postsecondary education aspirations in order to help ameliorate these concerns.

Environmental Barriers

As it relates to the ecological model of systems theory, specifically involving the microsystem and the environment, this construct acts as the foundation in the immediate surroundings of the African American man. I will highlight research studies that posits the neighborhood(s) and/or the community that interacts with the African American man, and how barriers evidence themselves through the environment. Moreover, exploring concrete studies that examine effects on how environmental barriers such as poverty, neighborhood safety and well-being can have the potential to negatively impact young African American men's opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. According to Bronfenbrenner (2000), the microsystem posits to have the most noticeable influence in the early experiences of the person-in-environment, as this setting often encompasses day-to-day living. Negative social living conditions in urban environments and inner

cities often pose critical risk factors, such as crime, violence, poverty, mental hopelessness and fear, all which can potentially act as barriers and impede African American men's successful life outcomes, specifically relating to their academics (Brooms, 2015; Bennett, 2019; Fletcher & Moore, 2021; Riggs et al., 2019; D. E. Thomas et al., 2021).

Researchers have further uncovered that environmental stressors not only hinders social, physical, and mental health, but have negative outcomes on educational attainment, causing an intersectionality of race, health, and class (Brooms, 2021a; King et al., 2022). Additional studies highlighted how high-risk factors, such as living in poor urban neighborhoods with low-income, single parenthood, and limited access to resources can increase psychological difficulties leading to contribute negatively to successful academic outcomes (Fletcher & Moore, 2021; A. Thomas et al., 2016).

One such study highlighted factors specific to the experiences of low-income African American men from low socioeconomic backgrounds and how their home environment impacted their educational experiences (Fletcher & Moore, 2021). The study was a qualitative study. Three themes emerged as the research findings: missing critical school and home supports, missing significant relationships and role models, and desire to earn money to provide for their families.

Missing Critical School and Home Supports

Participants shared that much of their home lives were without fathers. One stated that his father was locked up during the majority of his school years, and others stated that they lacked African American administrative role models and teachers, and some felt

the responsibility to provide for themselves without support (Fletcher & Moore, 2021). From the lens of the ecological model of systems theory, the impact of the absence of the father in the home can lead to an unhealthy disconnection at the micro-level, where social isolation and self-esteem concerns can be a factor for students' academic success (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Fletcher & Moore, 2021).

Search for Significant Relationships and Role Models

Participants asserted that due to their fathers not being in their lives, they admitted to seeking relationships and role models outside the home. One stated that his grandmother raised him and one stated that his role models were drug dealers in his neighborhood. Additionally, one of the students stated that his football coach, who was African American provided himself as role models for some of the African American men (Fletcher & Moore, 2021). Research points out that relationships can have either a positive or negative impact towards academic success, depending upon the environment that the youth are raised in (Bennett, 2019; Gilfan, 2021). In this example, three of the youth experienced different relationships within the dynamics of their environment. The role models of the grandmother and the coach supports a positive relational dynamic that can lead to a greater chance of academic and social success, in comparison with the youth who stated that the drug dealers in his neighborhood were his role models, leading to a negative outcome (Fletcher & Moore, 2021; A. Thomas et al., 2016). Towards that end, throughout intersectionality and structural barriers, many African American men are faced with complex decisions due to their environment that can either yield positive or negative outcomes (Henderson et al., 2023; M. C. James et al., 2022).

Desire to Earn Money to Provide for Their Families

Participants stated that poverty and the lack of income were barriers in their homes and neighborhoods. Moreover, some of the students acknowledged the difficulty to focus on schoolwork, when their families were struggling financially, leading them to share the burden of working or selling drugs to help support their families (Fletcher & Moore, 2021). Research shows that families experiencing poverty and lack of sufficient finances contribute as barriers as it relates to academic and social progress, especially relating to African American men (Rhiggs et al., 2019; A. Thomas et al., 2016). Moreover, these barriers can have lasting negative impacts for African American men who are often regulated as being deficient in academics and maladaptive in behavior, not taking in consideration the environmental barriers within the system that prohibits them from being successful (Bush & Bush, 2018; Wint et al., 2022).

As noted in this brief recap of this section, negative environmental barriers can evidence themselves in neighborhoods through poverty, low-income, and lack of sufficient resources and support from schools and communities (Bennett; 2019; Fletcher & Moore, 2021; Hackett et al., 2018). Towards that end, it is important to note, that some of the participants in this study did attend college, despite the environmental barriers, however, there is a gap in the literature as it relates to African American men who may have experienced some of these same barriers but did not have the opportunity or support to seek out postsecondary education. It is important to conduct my study in order to understand how these barriers evidence themselves through the lens of the ecological model of systems theory.

Systemic Barriers

This section will focus on recent studies on systemic factors, such as zero tolerance policy, in-school suspensions, and teacher diversity, and how these constructs may be evidenced through racial underpinnings, which may impede African American men's ability to successfully navigate positive school experiences (B. Adams, 2022; Ryan et al., 2022). These and subsequent barriers may unintentionally project that African American men are uninterested and unable to succeed at the postsecondary level (Gwathney, 2021; Henderson et al., 2020). Consequently, these systematic structures may act as invisible barriers of obstacles preventing some African American men from experiencing educational success (Heidelburg & Collins, 2023; Wallace & Gagen, 2020). In looking at the ecological model of systems theory, specifically with the Macrosystem, which includes the educational system, economic system, and governmental agencies, this section will discuss some of the components of the educational system as a systemic factor impacting African American men's educational outcomes.

Zero Tolerance Policy and School Suspensions

Zero tolerance policies are mandates that invoke disciplinary responses to students who incur school infractions such as classroom disruptions, drug activity, and certain negative behavior concerns that disrupt the school environment (Gwathney, 2021; Lehmann & Meldrum, 2021; Outland, 2018). Moreover, school disciplinary actions for African American male students have shown disproportionate accounts of student suspensions, discipline referrals, expulsions and are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than European Americans (Gwathney, 2021; Lehmann & Meldrum,

2021; Okilwa, & Robert, 2017). Many of these factors contribute to underperforming and poor academic outcomes of African American men without taking into context of the systemic environment of policies and procedures that may promote underlying racial inequality standards (Henderson et al., 2020; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

Gwathney (2021) utilized a case study with the theoretical framework of critical race theory as it relates to the zero-tolerance policy. The case study involved an African American adolescent and his experience with the zero-tolerance policy. The African American man was suspended due to multiple infractions in his class involving disruptive behavior and on one occasion "sleeping." As the study continued, the researcher found that the African American students' European American counterparts displayed similar behaviors throughout the course but was not reprimanded as harsh as the African American student, nor were they disciplined after numerous occurrences. The researcher further highlighted specific themes of emotional distress, social isolation, and academic exclusion.

Webster and Knaus (2018) also conducted a qualitative study in which they drew from critical race theory to explore nine African American male adolescents' experience with school suspensions. Their findings highlighted how school disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance policies and the school to prison pipeline, often align with societal racism. Webster and Knaus interviewed nine students who were suspended from school due to disciplinary infractions and addressed their experiences with the process. The findings indicated that the students felt that they were all dismissed as troublemakers and felt irrelevant. Statements from the students were listed as being silenced and unable to

voice their concerns about their suspensions, having little to no advocacy support on behalf of their suspensions, and how they felt the European American teachers were immediate in imposing disciplinary rulings without hearing their side of the story (Webster & Knaus, 2018). Taking this small sample of qualitative research findings, it is important to understand how underlying systemic barriers may reveal themselves in these real-life issues (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014; Webster, 2020; Webster & Knaus, 2018).

Although both research samples were important with utilizing critical race theory as the theoretical framework, there is limited research in understanding these dynamics through the ecological model of systems theory. As my research seeks to build on existing knowledge, conducting this study from the person-in-environment construct, and understanding how systemic barriers may evidence themselves through systemic inequalities such as zero tolerance policies and school suspensions which disproportionately affect African Americans, may add to the body of knowledge in exploring if African American men who have yet to attend college have experienced these concerns during school years.

Teacher Diversity

Teacher diversity has been a concern within the United States educational system. More than 80% of teachers in the United States are of European American descent with most being White women, compared to approximately 18% of non-White teachers, which lacks diversity for students of color, particularly African American students (Henderson et al., 2023; Lindsay, 2021; Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Moreover, Torres (2022) posited

that teacher diversity has the potential to improve cognitive and social functioning when minority students are taught by teachers of the same race (Torres, 2022). Particularly for African American men and other minorities, this construct is deemed to have considerable benefits, as the country is considerably becoming more diverse (B. Adams, 2022). The lack of teacher diversity from the lens of the ecological model of systems theory, specifically the macrosystem, where societal views, public policies, cultural values and norms are evidenced, may be an underlying factor of systemic racism, causing barriers for African American men (Wint et al., 2022). Ostensibly, this may prove as an underlying concern, possibly impacting why African American men have not chosen to pursue postsecondary education, lending itself as a barrier.

In looking at one relevant study, research was conducted on how African American men navigated through a public education system where the policies, and practices often promoted low expectations and unfair treatment within the school environment (Henderson et al., 2023). The themes that were highlighted were relational structures; socialization; intersectional identities. In all, those characteristics within the family environment led to helping these African American men navigate their kindergarten through Grade 12 experience, leading them to positive academic expectations and promoting college aspirations (Henderson et al., 2023). Towards that end, it is important to conduct this study to add to the body of literature, how African American men, from single parent households who have not attended college make meaning of their experiences in school as it relates to teacher diversity.

African American Male Teachers

African American male youth and young adults may have trepidation in pursuing postsecondary education due to the lack of African American male teachers in the educational system. Research studies highlighted that African American male students' felt a greater chance or more influenced to seek postsecondary education when taught by an African American male teacher (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Carey, 2020). Moreover, Sandles (2020) posited that the existence of male African American teachers promotes greater academic outcomes and lessens African American male students being placed in suspension or other disciplinary constructs. Consequently, this points to the lack of African American teachers within the educational system. Approximately 2% of teachers in the United States are African American (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Sandles, 2020; Walker, 2020; Webster, 2020). In the public school system in the United States, approximately 11.5% of African American men are teachers, compared to 78.9% of European Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). More specifically, in South Carolina, there were approximately 11.9% of African American male teachers, compared to 78.6% of European American teachers, which is consistent with the U.S. average (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

To further compound these statistics, some research posits that European American teachers may support a meritorious ideological belief that if persons or students work hard, they will achieve positive results. However, European American teachers may unintentionally dismiss the inherent structural inequalities that African American's

experience due to their position of privilege (B. Adams, 2022; Rogers & Brooms, 2020). These statistics may reveal a contributing factor for the study phenomemon.

In summary, in reviewing existing gaps in practice and research, negative environmental barriers can evidence themselves in neighborhoods through poverty, low-income, and lack of sufficient resources and support from schools and communities (Fletcher & Moore, 2021). Towards that end, it is important to note, that some of the participants in this study did attend college, despite the environmental barriers, however, there is a gap in the literature as it relates to African American men who may have experienced some of these same barriers but did not have the financial opportunity or social support to seek out postsecondary education. It is important to conduct this study in order to understand how these barriers evidence themselves through the lens of the ecological model of systems theory.

Additionally, utilizing critical race theory as the theoretical framework is important in many research studies, however, there is limited research in understanding these dynamics through the ecological model of systems theory. As my research seeks to build on existing practice, conducting this study from the person-in-environment construct, and understanding how systemic barriers may evidence themselves through systemic inequalities such as zero tolerance policies and school suspensions which disproportionately affect African Americans, may add to the body of knowledge in practice in exploring if African American men who have yet to attend college have experienced these concerns during school years.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature on African American men's postsecondary education aspirations suggests that further research needs to be conducted from a qualitative perspective to understand the experiences of those who are not currently enrolled in college due to negative typecasts or societal perceptions (T. R. Buckley, 2018; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). This gap in the literature may provide insight as to potential barriers from environmental and/or systemic concerns. Moreover, much of the research highlights first generation African American students and African American students attending HBCUs and PWIs (Allen, 2020; Brooms, 2017; Hines et al., 2019; Irvine, 2019). The current gap that is within this literature further aligns with the background and problem statement of this research study. Towards that end, it is important that this research be conducted to answer the research question of. How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education? In Chapter 3, I will explain how I conducted this qualitative study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this chapter, I will address the methodology that was used to conduct this research study to help answer the research question. How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education? The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, of single parent households ages 18–24, in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education in Columbia, South Carolina.

Research Design and Rationale

The research method used for this study was a generic qualitative study design and was constructed using in-depth interviews in order to capture rich thick descriptions from the perspectives of the men who were interviewed. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research design is an iterative process and is flexible, as it is guided by the research participants and the researcher. Therefore, this method was most effective in capturing the participant narratives in informing the research question.

The rationale for conducting this general qualitative study was due to the nonspecific guidelines of capturing rich and thick data, such as using open-ended questions and/or semi structured interviews with the goal of being able to gain true insight from the perspective of the participant and to interpret the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As a novice researcher, it was appropriate for this research to be conducted in generic fashion as this remains in alignment with the study and best assisted

me, as the researcher with gaining a better understanding of how African American men, ages 18–24 from single parent homes make meaning of the environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

Qualitative research approach involves multiple interpretive methods such as interviews, observations, and focus groups in order to gain an understanding of person(s), groups, or communities in their natural settings (Burkholder, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although, this research could be conducted utilizing multiple forms of qualitative methods mentioned above, a basic generic qualitative method was chosen for this study, as open-ended and semi structured interviews would best answer and interpret the research question of how do African American men, ages 18–24 from single parent households, describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher is an instrument involved in qualitative research, the concepts utilize trustworthiness and credibility of the researcher data in order to ensure valid and reliable results (Babbie, 2021). Towards that end, validating components, such as member checks, peer-debriefing, and multiple researchers would assist towards increasing the trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Babbie, 2017). As an African American man, understanding my biases and beliefs is critical for this research to be credible and trustworthy. Continued reflection and reducing my input and beliefs is paramount in order to gain the true perspectives of the participants. Ravitch and Carl (2016) posited that continuously maintaining the understanding that the participants are

the experts in their meanings and understandings of their phenomenon, and utilizing the concept of coresearcher and co-collaboration, can assist with reducing hierarchy and maintaining credibility and trustworthiness in data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As an African American, understanding that my relationship was closely tied to my study, posited me to utilize reflective journals and field notes, in which I constantly reviewed to address and eliminate as much bias as possible.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The participants recruited for this study included African American men between the ages of 18 and 24 who resided in single family homes. The research recruitment was conducted in the predetermined zip code area of 29203 in Columbia, South Carolina. I recruited 15 research participants. To remain in alignment with qualitative studies, posits the sample size of 8-15 participants, with successful saturation around 8 to 15 participants (Guest et al., 2006). Saturation is defined in terms of data that has been collected to a point where there is no new information uncovered through the analysis to answer the research question (Guest et al., 2020). To ensure saturation, I analyzed the data utilizing a thematic analyses of interview content both after each participant was interviewed, and after all participants were interviewed in order to establish new and emerging themes as the interviews were conducted.

I further utilized codes to establish explanation of meaning from the data collection (Saldaña, 2016). Towards that end, the final sample size was fifteen, as saturation began to be reached at 11 participants. The goal was to obtain rich and thick

qualitative data from the participants in order to answer the research question ethically and thoroughly (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants were recruited through local flyers and emails. Data were collected through engaging the community within the specific area of research interest by distributing flyers as well as engaging local high schools and single-family housing areas. Participants were provided with voluntary informed consent forms and information regarding privacy and confidentiality. The type of sampling was purposive sampling. Purposive, sometimes called "convenience sampling," is a nonprobability sampling form that posits the recruitment of participants for a specific purpose as available for recruitment, that may provide the information needed to answer or inform the research study or question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. The interview candidates were provided emailed and typed documentation that clearly provided information regarding participant information and recruitment, excluded populations, approved storage areas for documentation (i.e. electronic format), disposal and deidentification of documentation (i.e. personal information), and voluntary informed consent participation. Interview questions were organized within a semi structured framework that allowed the gathering of in-depth information and allowed the interview to uncover additional themes and views as needed. Questions were crafted with an introduction, where details of the study, confidentiality, and privacy information were provided. The researcher established rapport and trust with the participant(s) by utilizing warm-up questions followed by more specific and probing questions.

Questions were related to my specific research area and counseling and resources would have been made available in order that the participants could utilize when discussing sensitive topics. Gift cards for the participants were provided for their time. Finally, a debriefing atmosphere, and review of the purpose of the study were discussed with the participants. The interviews were scheduled based upon the participants' availability. This was done to remain respectful and to adjust my schedule to fit the participants schedule, which posited to enhance a co-collaborative effort and reduced any potential hierarchy constructs. The interview questions were primarily open-ended questioning in order to capture the perceptions of the participants and how they made meaning of their experiences. Some of the interview questions were as follows:

1. What neighborhood elements or events in your environment did you consider as barriers to pursuing postsecondary education?
2. What school policies or procedures in your school environment did you consider as barriers to pursuing postsecondary education?
3. Did you have any experience with being taught by African American male teachers during your high school education? If yes, can you share with me your experience with being taught by them? How did that experience influence your interest in pursuing postsecondary education?
4. Did you have any experience with being taught by non-African American male teachers during your high school education? If yes, can you share with me your experience with being taught by them? How did that experience influence your interest in pursuing postsecondary education?

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

In this general qualitative study, the researcher conducted interviews via face-to-face. I followed a protocol (see Appendix) when interviewing each participant. The duration of the interview process and data collection events was approximately 45 min to an hour. The data were obtained through the natural information received from the participants' interviews (Burkholder et al., 2016). Data were recorded through smartphone devices and Otter.ai app. During the debriefing, communication was relayed to the participants regarding the next steps. I transcribed the interview and informed the participants that once the interview notes were completed, the participants had the opportunity to review the notes.

Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore the environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, of single parent households ages 18–24, in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. The research question was: How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education? The chosen approach aligned with the qualitative research design involving in-depth interviews. This was done in order to capture rich thick descriptions from the perspectives of the African American men that were interviewed. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research design is an iterative process and is flexible, as it is guided by the research participants and the researcher. Qualitative inquiry involves considerable attention that denotes interview analysis, data capturing and observation in

order to identify themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2016). Moreover, as the researcher is an instrument of qualitative research, immersing oneself with the data posits to gather a clearer understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Ravitch and Carl, 2016).

In order to ensure saturation, I analyzed the interview questions as the interviews were conducted, as well as when the interviews were completed. I utilized field notes and journal notes in order to establish repeated themes from the perspectives of the participants (Saldaña, 2016). As this content process continues to be iterative, the researcher identified themes and extracted them into codes, through thematic analyses which established saturation, in which no additional data is being found or discovered (R. Buckley, 2018; Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2018).

The methods of data capturing were hand transcription and NVivo. In qualitative research, gathering descriptive data from a person's perspective and meaning requires careful capturing of the data, which involves coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). According to Saldaña (2016), coding posits as phrases that are symbolic links to visual or language-based data. In qualitative data, researchers use codes to translate the actual data from the individual or group and attribute the meaning of their phenomenon or experience (Saldaña, 2016). To establish saturation, I analyzed the data after each interview through thematic analyses, in order to identify current and new themes. The rationale for conducting the analysis after each interview was to consistently categorize and code the data through themes until the interviews begin to yield the same codes and no new information was produced (R. Buckley, 2022). Qualitative data analysis software packages provide the qualitative researcher with analytical tools that assist with content

analysis, transcription analysis, coding, and texting interpretations. In conducting a general qualitative study that seeks to explore the environmental and systemic barriers that African American men ages 18–24 raised in single parent households experience in pursuing a postsecondary education, the NVivo coding transcription was the likely choice, as this qualitative software package was a simpler tool that was more direct and in alignment with the chosen general study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

As the researcher is an instrument in qualitative studies, ensuring trustworthiness and credibility aligns with the objective unbiased purpose of research.

Credibility

Credibility strengthens and improves qualitative research by utilizing components such as member checks and peer-debriefing (Burkholder et al., 2016). For the purpose of this research, member-checking was utilized as well as open-ended questioning which allowed the participants to expand and elaborate within the questions regarding how they made meaning of pursuing postsecondary education. Additionally, obtaining rich thick descriptive interview data and reflective journaling was utilized in order to reduce researcher bias.

Transferability

Transferability is achieved through rich descriptive contextual data that can be applied to similar participants in different settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The goal of qualitative research is an iterative process and constantly changing, and may not apply

directly to other contexts, but can be applied with the rich thick data that is transcribed and presented from the perspective of the participant.

Dependability

Dependability is where the data remains consistent over time and supports the argument or research question from the core basis of the qualitative study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In order to continue to ensure dependability, the researcher utilized detailed reflection journal notes to remain consistent with the findings of the research in a clear and consistent manner.

Confirmability

In order for the qualitative researcher to inform the research inquiry, and that the data are accurate, posit the researcher to continuously challenge assumptions, biases and reflect on each aspect of the data collection process throughout all stages. I further incorporated the strategy of member-checking where the researcher engaged in meaningful interpretations of the data and addressed any personal biases and assumptions that may hinder the richness of the data and challenge the rigor of the quality of the research (Burkholder et al., 2016).

In conducting qualitative research, the researcher is identified as the research tool, as the research is collected, analyzed, and synthesized. What forms is a meaningful gap in the literature that posits addressing a social change issue that requires further research to be conducted or expanded. With regard to threats to validity and reliability, would be comparable to trustworthiness and credibility when involved with qualitative research (Babbie, 2021). As the researcher is the instrument, the data is not manipulated but is

obtained through the natural information received from the participants interviews, focus groups, or observations (Burkholder et al., 2016). In order to improve trustworthiness and credibility would lead towards obtaining rich thick descriptive interview data and utilizing methods such as member checks and peer debriefing (Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell, 2009).

Ethical Procedures

Following the guidance of Walden University's Institutional Review Board, I explained the requirements for the study along with informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. My Institutional Review Board approval number (05-28-24-0997659) was included on the consent form. I informed the research participants that their identity would be kept confidential, within the limits of the law, and that they could withdraw from participating in the study at any time. The participants' identity remained anonymous using codes and numbers. According to Babbie (2021), participants' names should not be used in order to further protect anonymity. I further informed the participants that the data will be kept secure by the researcher. All recorded and written data will be kept secure on a password-protected computer. All names and personal information were retracted/and or de-identified, and the use of codes were utilized when presenting the research. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Summary

Chapter 3 began with a discussion of the research design and rationale. I also discussed my role as the researcher. Then, I described the methodology for the study,

including participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the data analysis plan. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures were also addressed. In Chapter 4, the findings of the research study will be presented to address the research question from this general qualitative study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore the environmental and systemic barriers of African American males, of single parent households, ages 18–24, in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. The research question that informed this qualitative study was: How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education? In Chapter 4, I will discuss the research setting, participant demographics, and data collection and analysis. Then, I will present evidence of trustworthiness and the results. The chapter will conclude with the summary of key points and a transition to Chapter 5.

Setting

In this general qualitative study of exploring the environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, of single parent households, ages 18–24, relating to pursuing a postsecondary education, the researcher conducted the study in a private, locked office during a time that was both convenient and private for the participants. In the environment of the office there were two chairs, one semi-large desk and one small table. All items were sturdy and were free of any damage. There was only one door and one window, which both had closed blinds to protect the privacy of the participant. Moreover, the interviews were held at a time when no other people were located on the premises. There were no organizational and/or personal conditions that contributed to influencing any of the participants.

The participants were provided with the informed consent documentation and was read aloud by the researcher as well. The participants then signed the informed consent documentation in the presence of the researcher, in which case, a copy was also provided for the participant. The researcher then reinformed the participant that the interview would be recorded and transcribed, and a copy would be provided to the participant after transcription to ensure accuracy. The researcher then proceeded to conduct the interview.

Demographics

The participants were African American men between the ages of 19 to 24 who were raised in single parent households. None attended any postsecondary college. There was a total of 15 participants. All participants were recruited within the 29203-area code of Columbia, South Carolina. All of the participants identified as being African American men. Ten of the participants were working in various jobs to include warehouse work, restaurant work, construction, painting, lawncare, automobile detailing, janitorial, truck driving, grocery store and auto mechanic work. The other five participants were searching for employment. The age breakdown of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Ages

Participant	Age
1	22
2	24
3	23
4	19
5	21
6	22
7	24

8	19
9	21
10	22
11	20
12	19
13	21
14	23
15	20

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted utilizing semi structured interviews, which aligns with general qualitative studies. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), semi structured interview questions are best utilized for qualitative research in order to gather rich and thick information from the perspectives of the participants. The researcher utilized the approved semi structured interview questions with all 15 participants. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from Walden University (no. 05-28-24-0997659), I posted flyers in approved local front shops, single parent apartment complexes, and local laundromats. I conducted a brief phone interview to prescreen the potential participants who contacted me. Once participants were approved, their interviews were based upon their convenience and availability.

For this qualitative study, the researcher was the instrument. In qualitative studies, the researcher serves as the instrument, as this allows the researcher to collect the data utilizing interview questions, observations, and field notes in order to closely understand the experiences from the perspectives of the participants (Burkholder et al., 2016). Working with my dissertation chair and second committee member, I crafted 11 open- and closed-ended, semi structured questions that were specific to the research question of

How do African American men, ages 18–24 raised in single parent households describe their environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

Data were recorded utilizing one smart-phone device and an I-pad and there were no variations of the data collection procedures that were presented in the methodology section and there were no unusual circumstances or issues that were encountered or discovered during the data collection procedures. The recording devices were pretested for accuracy before the interviews were conducted and were reviewed after the interviews were conducted. I transcribed the recorded data by hand and coded it using NVivo. In order to capture the meaningful experiences and perspectives of the participants, the researcher utilized these two methods to capture rich and thick data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

Data Analysis

For this general qualitative study, a thematic analysis was done to analyze the data. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns and themes through codes, thereby reducing the data in order to extract them into themes throughout the iterative process of interviews and field notes (R. Buckley, 2018; Guest et al., 2020). Moreover, the coding process involves filtering and highlighting the transcribed and analyzed data searching for patterns and consistent links within the data which illuminates themes of how the participants make meaning of their lives and experiences as it relates to a specific topic and/or research question (Saldaña, 2016). Towards that end, my research question was,

How do African American men, ages 18–24 describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

During the initial process of analyzing the data, I transcribed the data by listening to the recorded interviews and hand transcribing along with utilizing an I-pad with Otter.ai app (which is a voice-transcribing application that transcribe recorded audio) as a second tool of transcription. Additionally, as I completed each interview, I transcribed the data within a few days of completing the interview to stay close and immerse myself with the data. As I continued with the interview and transcription process, I also took field notes and journal notes shortly after the interviews were done with each participant in order to capture fresh information that I observed during the interview process with each participant, as well as utilizing reflexive journaling to capture and address any biases that may occur as a result of being the research instrument. The field and reflexive journal notes helped establish and bolster an immediate system of capturing the data and understanding how the participants' made meaning of their experiences as well as to bracket any assumptions that I may possibly have.

During the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the privacy and confidentiality statement with the participants and explained any follow-up questions that they may have had as it related to the interview process. I then explained the process of the interview steps. I explained to the participants that the interview would be recorded and transcribed by myself only. I then explained that after the transcription was completed, I would make contact with the participant via cell phone to allow the participant to review the transcribed data to ensure accuracy. I further explained that this review was called

member checking. I then explained that member checking was the process that qualitative researchers utilize to ensure that the transcribed information was accurate from the perspective of the participant in order to allow the data to be credible and trustworthy (Babbie, 2017).

During the continuation of the interview and transcribing process, I began the process of reading through the data to begin the coding process. According to Saldaña (2016), coding is described as identifying words or phrases that can be symbolically associated and assigned to a participant's meaning in order to interpret the data. Additionally, coding the data also allowed me to establish patterns, which are repetitive and/or consistent occurrences within the data that appear more than once (Saldaña, 2016). In summarizing and condensing the data through codes, allows for the researcher to identify themes and subthemes within the data that helps to establish saturation within the data (Saldaña, 2021). Saturation is defined within the qualitative language as when no new information or insight is found or discovered during the interview process with the participants (R. Buckley, 2018; Guest et al., 2020).

My steps to begin the coding process was to listen to the recorded transcription and review the hand-written transcription, as well as the transcription from the Otter.ai app, which was referred to earlier as a voice-transcribing application that transcribed recorded audio in real-time, or previously recorded time. During this process, I was able to listen to the recording and review the hand-written transcription and make corrections for any misspelled words or errors within the data. This process allowed me to further establish the trustworthiness of the data, as I had completed hand-written transcriptions,

and a word documented transcription. I gathered my interview questions, field notes, and journal notes and established two sections that addressed the research question of How do African American men, ages 18–24 raised in single parent households describe their experiences in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. I utilized open coding as the initial coding process.

First-Cycle Coding

During the first cycle of open coding, I created categories of barriers: environmental and systemic. I also identified subthemes, which I labeled: "college preparation in high school," "African American male teachers," "understanding of the college admission process," "goals of attending college," and "role models/mentors." These subthemes were constructed and revised to the final themes, which is listed in the results section to help address the overall understanding of how these young African American men, ages 18–24 raised in single parent households describe their environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

During the first cycle of coding, I focused on the environmental barriers section of my research question. Towards that end, a list of codes that emerged repeatedly from the data were rough neighborhood, violence, street violence, drug-infested neighborhood, bullying, violence, drugs, drug environment, tough neighborhood, violent neighborhood, and gun violence. Additionally, during the first cycle of coding, I reread the data and focused on the systemic barriers section of my research question. The codes that repeatedly emerged from the data were teachers just ready to get me out of there, didn't

feel prepared, lack of teacher preparation, no teacher interaction, no college preparation, no idea about the college process, no teacher support, no administration support.

Second-Cycle Coding

During the second cycle of coding, I utilized NVivo software for categorizing and grouping the codes from the interviews in order to develop themes. The NVivo software package was shown to be more closely aligned with my general qualitative study, as it allowed me to successfully navigate the first cycle of coding with confidence and utilizing the second cycle of coding with NVivo, allowed me to develop categories and themes extracted from the data. In this next section I discuss the codes and code phrases that emerged from the coding and extraction of the data. I then discuss the themes that emerged and were extracted from the codes. The second-cycle coding was done through NVivo. As I continued to reread, and extract codes from the data for accuracy, I utilized NVivo to highlight specific words and phrases within the data, and sorted and organized the codes through each participants interview responses to create patterns and categories.

Discrepant Cases

During the data collection and analysis of this research study, there were no discrepant cases, as the researcher strictly followed the guidelines of the data collection procedures and remained consistent with asking all 15 participants the approved questions and transcribing, coding, and identifying codes and themes in the same fashion as reported earlier in the data collection and analysis section. I coded the data through multiple cycles and consistently read and reread the data to develop the appropriate themes that best addressed the research question. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016),

when constructing and developing codes, it is important for the data to be refined and revised to emerge with the most accurate themes in the interpretation of the data. I identified no outliers within the data, as the research question was specific enough to control for outliers. The research question was, How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households, describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this section, the researcher will discuss evidence of trustworthiness, which entails how qualitative researchers control for ensuring that the research collected was done with specific attention to protecting the participants confidentiality and ensuring that the research was done with an unbiased approach. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), trustworthiness in qualitative data posits that the data collected was true to how the participants described and explained their experiences to a particular phenomenon or area of focus. Within this section, I will provide details as it relates to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, all which help to increase the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility seeks to establish research that is reliable and trustworthy, involving various steps, such as member-checking and peer-debriefing (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this research study, the researcher conducted the interviews after the participants were screened for eligibility and provided with confidential privacy and consent forms that were explained in detail. The researcher conducted semi structured interviews, which

were transcribed, coded, and themed in order to remain in alignment with qualitative studies. The researcher utilized field notes and member-checking with the participants in order to improve credibility. Moreover, the researcher utilized reflective journals to control for any biases and bracket any assumptions.

Transferability

Transferability seeks to allow the research conducted in a way that can be expanded upon and utilized with similar frameworks in order to reproduce similarities or differences comparable to other research studies (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I utilized semi structured interviews which allows for rich and thick description from the experiences of the participants, as well as hand-transcription and member-checks with the participants. The researcher provided the participants with the transcribed data for review and accuracy. The researcher then followed the guidelines of interpreting the data from the experiences of the participants in order to best explain the results of the research from their perspective.

Dependability

Dependability posits that the data collected are consistent and stable and answers the research question of the qualitative study within the framework of the research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I read and reread the data, coded, themed, and utilized reflexive journals in a consistent manner after each interview, transcription, coding, and thematic process. I further repeated these processes multiple times to ensure that the data are dependable.

Confirmability

In addressing confirmability, the researcher challenges their own assumptions and biases throughout the entire process of the data collection to ensure that the data are accurate from the perspectives of the participants only (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Audio-recording and verbatim transcription techniques were utilized, ensuring that the participants' responses were from their own experiences helped to ensure confirmability. As the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research it is important for the researcher to continue to reflect on their own biases and experiences and continue to challenge personal assumptions to ensure the data are accurate from the perspective of the participants and not the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Results

In this section, I will discuss how the categorization process was constructed in developing the themes that were generated through the coding process. In the process of constructing the codes, I categorized the codes based on repeated patterns of words and phrases that were identified during the reading and rereading of the data. I identified five themes to help address the research question, How do African American men, ages 18–24 describe their environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. Environmental barriers are defined as community and neighborhood(s) that influences and may act as barriers for the African American man, more specifically as it relates to safety, poverty, and violence. Systemic barriers are defined as inequalities that are embedded within social, local, and governmental institutions, such as the educational system.

Themes in qualitative research are categories that are developed from outcomes through the emerging process of codes from transcribed data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Table 2 shows the five themes that were identified through the consistencies of the coded data from how the participants make meaning of their experiences as it relates to environmental and systemic barriers in pursuing a postsecondary education.

Table 2

Themes Categorized by Barrier

Theme	Barrier category
Theme 1: Neighborhood Violence	Environmental
Theme 2: Lack of Teacher and Administrative Support Within the School System	Systemic
Theme 3: College Preparation	Systemic
Theme 4: Understanding of the College Admission Process	Systemic
Theme 5: Mentors and Role Models	Environmental and systemic

Theme 1: Neighborhood Violence

The research question of this study was, How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. During the transcription of this general qualitative study, the reading and rereading of the data, as well as the first- and second-cycle coding, 13 of the participants described on multiple occasions, how the barriers in their environment were issues related to neighborhood violence that kept them from having a focus on college, which is how this theme emerged. Two of the participants stated that their neighborhoods were quiet and had supportive community members. This

theme aligns with my research question as it illuminates how the participants described their environmental barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

Violence can often occur in neighborhoods that lack sufficient resources and opportunities to thrive, thus increasing the likelihood of criminal behavior and drug activity, which often leads to violence and mental stress. According to Bush and Bush (2018), environmental barriers can have detrimental effects on African American men's educational success (Bush & Bush, 2018). Participants 2 and 4 discussed how drugs, bullying and street violence distracted them and how the thought of college was not on their minds as they felt they had too much going on in their neighborhoods to focus. Participants 6 and 10, also highlighted how the infestation of drugs and violence in their neighborhoods played a pivotal part in getting them "caught up" in the streets. Participant 10 expressed this very passionately, stating that:

> People gotta stop judging us by where we come from…we don't have any opportunities. We only have the streets, that's how I got caught up… We don't have any activities…We tryin to survive…selling drugs…doing thangs…Just show us what to do and give us a better way that don't lead to the penitentiary or grave. I did want to go to college… I wanted to play football…but I couldn't focus… I had to survive on the streets.

That was a powerful statement by Participant 10, speaking to the trauma that is often experienced within inner-city neighborhoods. His experience spoke to the psychological damage that can increase mental health concerns and subsequently instill a lack of focus in social and academic functioning for African American men (Brooms,

2015; Bennett, 2019; Fletcher & Moore, 2021). Moreover, these findings contribute to my research question as it relates to how African American men describe some of their environmental barriers that hinders them from even being able to think about college or postsecondary education.

The participants are clearly trying to survive in a less than thriving environment. For example, Participants 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 shared that their neighborhoods were very hard and rough, and that shootings and drugs were constant issues that they experienced dealing with. Barriers such as these experienced by African American men within their neighborhood's environment impacts not only their mental health, but their safety as well. Despite their responses to their neighborhood issues, many of these young African American men had aspirations of pursuing a postsecondary education. Participants 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 stated that they wanted to attend college and have the opportunity to pursue their goals but could not really focus because of the issues going on outside of their homes and the issues within the home. Participant 14 explained how him going out of his home, he would see things that kids should not see, and how his options were limited. He stated,

> I would sometimes walk out the door and see people who were selling drugs and doing things that we as kids shouldn't see. I did at one point want to go to college, but growing up in my neighborhood, I had to survive. I felt like I had to step up and help, you feel me. My mom worked two jobs and had a bunch of kids.

Understanding the complexities and intersections of stress on this young man, from being in an environment where drugs and crime are prevalent, is exacerbated when

having to also deal with feeling as if you have to help provide for the home, due to having limited resources as a result of a single parent, who is obviously trying her best to support her children. This participant and the other participants' responses described that neighborhood violence was a contributing factor to their decisions not to pursue a postsecondary education.

Theme 2: Lack of Teacher and Administrative Support Within the School System

In this section, I will discuss how the participants described their systemic barriers as it relates to lack of teacher and administrative support within the school that they attended. Twelve of the 15 participants shared that their learning experiences in high school were contributing factors in their decisions not to pursue postsecondary education. This theme emerged as many of the participants spoke about the barriers that they experienced within the school system.

Teachers and administrators should be a larger part of the supportive experience in school when teaching young African American men, specifically as it relates to African American men from single parent households. According to Goings and Sewell (2019), it is essential and important for teachers and administrators to support African American students as it helps to establish trust and enhance their goals in the beliefs that they can obtain a postsecondary degree. Towards that end, these participants shared that they felt disengaged and that teachers were lackluster in supporting them when they were attending high school. Many of which contributed as barriers to going to college. Participants 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13 shared that the teachers and administration staff didn't

encourage or interact with them throughout their school years. They felt unsupported and invisible. “Participant 9 had this to say about his experience with teachers:

> The teachers were just not interacting with me…I felt like they were lackluster at times. They would just give me the paper and tell me to do the work. Man… I don’t know…it just didn’t seem like they were supportive or encouraging enough. This type of stuff happened through my whole high school time.

Participant 9’s experiences with his teachers speak to how he described the systemic barriers that were reflective of his interactions within a system that caused him to question rather or not he was valued in school by his teachers. Moreover, some of the participants stated that they felt the teachers were dismissive and didn’t take time to explain the work to them. Participant 7 shared that: The teachers were not even teaching…they were too busy doing other things…A lot of them used to be on their phone and telling us to read the instructions. Additionally, “Participant 11 shared that:

> I would say that I am a hands-on person… The teacher would just tell us to look up the information on the internet or look in the book…Sometimes I just wanted the teacher to break it down a little bit so I could understand it better.

In these responses from the participants, it points to research where teachers may not provide challenging school material or increased academic rigor, due to the beliefs that young African American men are deficient in learning and incapable of producing high quality work (C. E. James, 2019; Nojan, 2020). Consequently, Kunjufu (1979) and Harris (2018) discussed the lack of motivation from the experiences of African American young men and their struggle to perform within their strengths due to school curriculums

that rarely support their culture and lack relevancy to their identity (Harris, 2018; Kunjufu, 1979). To better understand this dynamic from the model of systems theory standpoint, it is important to understand how these participants experienced these barriers related to having an impact on their views of teacher interactions and support, and how these barriers impacted their decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Theme 3: College Preparation

The participants' experiences conveyed that that they did not feel prepared for college. All 15 participants shared that they had little to no engagement regarding college preparation in school. Thirteen of the participants expressed that these experiences factored into their decision-making about pursuing a post-secondary education. Two of the participants stated that after high school they were still undecided about pursuing college.

College preparation is important for African American men who are considering pursuing a postsecondary education. This theme emerged through the participants' overwhelming responses that centered around their perceptions that they felt as if there was no real meaningful engagement with them in the classroom or school about their aspirations to attend college. This theme fits into the research question as it further explicates how African American men experience systemic barriers that often go unnoticed, due to studies reporting on quantitative factors and school reports on negative statistics about African American men attending college (D'orio, 2022; Hines et al., 2020). Consequently, these studies lack information regarding qualitative data, specifically in-depth interviews, which helps gain understandings on how African

American men, describe underlying systemic issues in the classroom that often play a part in their decisions not to pursue postsecondary education.

Furthermore, this research study argues with data that supports that beliefs that African American men are often labeled and rendered as having low academic expectations and being unmotivated, which posits the beliefs from teachers that college goals are not obtainable and unrealistic for African American men (Allen, 2017; Cage et al., 2018). Towards that end, it is important to explore themes and narratives from a qualitative lens, that may add insight as to reasons these African American men experience being unmotivated in school as it relates to seeking college education. This research shares the stories of these participants and how they make meaning as it relates to not being prepared for college.

Participants 4, 14, and 15 shared similar accounts about the lack of being introduced or prepared for college by their teachers. Their experiences were described as not being informed about college, not putting college on the forefront, and teachers not focusing on college information, such as grants and scholarships. According to Participant 4, his teachers didn't provide him any information on college when he was a senior:

> Ummm…nah…not at all…I was a senior and the teacher didn't mention anything about college… it was nothing for college or nothing like that… I felt like it didn't matter to her anyway…So…yea, that's what it seemed like… it seemed like she was just thinking that I wasn't good enough for college.

Another participant (Participant 14) shared that he didn't know anything about scholarships, grants, or anything related to college:

> I didn't know about a whole bunch of different scholarships when I was in school…I didn't even know about a lot of those extra different grants. I played football in high school, but nobody told me…you know what I mean…so…I was oblivious to that…How I found out was from people who went to other schools, and by that time, I was out of high school.

These experiences from the above participants speak to a larger systemic issue that suggests the needs for teachers to better engage their students, specifically as it relates to college preparation. The participants expressed not being aware of information related to college or postsecondary education.

Theme 4: Understanding of the College Admission Process

The college admission process involves gaining an understanding of the various steps in navigating the process of how to search for colleges, how to fill out applications, criteria for admission, financial aid, scholarships, and enrollment deadlines. This process can be tedious if there are no clear directions on how to access these steps. For many of the participants from this research study, their understanding of the college admission process was extremely limited. Twelve of the 15 participants described having very little knowledge about the college admission process to not having any idea of the college admission process. Participants 1, 5, 7, and 11 shared similar accounts about the college admission process, from: not being told anything about how to get into college, no engagement from the guidance counselors about going to college and not taking the time

to explain the college admission process. Participant 11 shared a powerful statement that spoke volumes about how he was uninformed about the admission process:

> I had absolutely no idea about the college process…The guidance counselors or teachers did not talk about it all… all these people would ever tell me about, was getting into a job like trade work. I felt that I had to look at college stuff on my own… My mom didn't go to college, so it was kind of like, I didn't have no guidance on how the college process worked.

Young African American men who were raised in single parent households, from low-income areas where schools and resources are limited, face various barriers that often limit their opportunities for obtaining a college education (Carey, 2021; Fletcher & Moore, 2021; D. E. Thomas et al., 2021). Many of the participants also shared that their parents did not attend college, which further exacerbates this barrier. Additionally, Participant 12 shared that his understanding of the college process was not clearly explained to him, and it seemed as if the counselor was being dismissive. He stated,

> Man, I was trying to ask my guidance counselor person about college, because I wanted to play football…she just seemed like it wasn't important…It seemed like she was just ready to get me out of there…She told me about a couple of flyers and that was it.

The overall responses from the participants suggests that there needs to be more intentional approaches to introducing and exposing young African American men to college or postsecondary education. Research continues to highlight and suggest that young Black men continue to experience inequalities, negative societal perceptions, and

discredits their academic abilities in educational spaces due to lack of teacher and administration support (Huerta et al; Short, 2018). The current study highlights the voices of these young African American men and how they describe their understanding of the college enrollment process, which was considered a systemic barrier to pursuing postsecondary education.

Theme 5: Mentors and Role Models

Mentors and role models are important for young African American men from single parent households. Although there are some male single parents, research studies show that approximately 67% of single parent households are led by women (Danforth & Miller, 2018). The participants in this research study reported that they were raised by their mothers and grandmothers. Three of the participants, although raised by their mother, their fathers remained a role model in their lives. During the interview process, many of the participants shared that their teachers were mostly non-African American and female.

This theme fit into my research question as 12 of the 15 participants reported having none to a few African American teachers, and/or role models, in their lives, and as a result, many of the participants shared that this dynamic had an impact on their studies in high school and contributed to the notion that college wasn't a priority. Interestingly enough, data reflects that there are approximately 2% of African American male teachers within our educational system (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) Moreover, research highlights that African American male students yield a greater opportunity to seek and obtain postsecondary education when an African American male teacher is

present (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023). The research participants shared similar accounts of how the lack of African American male role models in their lives shaped their experiences in their neighborhood environment and school environment.

Participants 4, 6, 7, 9, 13 shared that they did not have positive role models in their homes or school, and how that dynamic was a barrier because of the lack of guidance from a male perspective. Participant 4 elaborated in detail sharing that:

> We need more Black male teachers…some-times just a Black male classroom can help with guidance… I'm thinking you know… we need that Black male…a real-life figure…you know what I'm saying, because out here…you need it…some of us don't got a father at home, or whatever, might not have an uncle…and the brothers who they think supposed to be teaching them…THEY don't know… All they know is the streets…. we need to be encouraged to know that it's cool to be educated…not dumb…not stupid…you know what I'm saying.

Participants further described that more mentors and role models who looked like them (African American male) could have inspired them to go to college or possibly learn a trade or skill. Participant 6 described these experiences as such:

> Most of my teachers…that I can remember where female…I did have one Indian teacher in high school, but I ain't have any Black male teachers…I think that if I would have had some Black male teachers, it could have maybe…you know… put my thoughts on college…I didn't have any role models like that.

The collective experiences from these young African American men suggests that having positive African American male mentors, role models, and teachers within their

neighborhoods and schools would be a great support and a great benefit which can enhance educational skills and promote an environment that may influence greater academic outcomes and increase the likelihood of these young men to seek out postsecondary education.

Summary

In Chapter 4 of this general qualitative study, I presented the results of my investigation, which addressed the following research question: How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households describe the environmental and systemic barriers experienced in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. I began with discussing the introduction, the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and now summary. I discussed the codes and themes that emerged through the data collection process from the perspectives of the interview participants. In Chapter 5, I will interpret the findings, discuss the limitations and implications of the study, offer recommendations for further research, and provide a conclusion to the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore the environmental and systemic barriers of African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households and how they describe their experiences in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. The nature of this study was a general qualitative study. I chose a qualitative study, as it aligns with the researchers' epistemological views of the world. From an interpretivist and social constructive perspective, I view that there are multiple meanings of how individuals see and interpret their worldview, and that the world is not easily quantifiable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Epistemology refers to how individuals view the world and generate knowledge (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Moreover, qualitative research and its roots derive from an interpretivist/social constructivist perspective as it relates to knowledge being constructed from the interpretations of individuals, and their experiences (Creswell, 2018). There have been multiple studies conducted on research involving African American men within the middle-school system (Nojan, 2020) within the frameworks of critical race theory (Vasser et al., 2021), and utilizing quantitative methods (Danforth & Miller, 2017), but there has been limited research on conducting general qualitative studies on African American men from single parent households who have not attended college from the theoretical lens of the ecological model of systems theory. This research was conducted to highlight the voices of these men, and how they describe the environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

This general qualitative study was conducted utilizing semi structured interviews which allowed for the researcher to gather rich and thick descriptions from the perspective of the participants interviewed. Interviews were transcribed via hand-transcription and NVivo qualitative software, coded, and analyzed utilizing a thematic analysis approach which aligns with qualitative research approaches (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Through the continuous process of reading, rereading the data, the coding process and thematic analysis, five themes emerged from the research: neighborhood violence, lack of teacher and administrative support from the school system, college preparation, understanding of the college admission process, and mentors/role models. These themes were developed to support teachers, administrators, and other school officials in understanding the complexities of the systemic and environmental barriers that African American men who have not attended or pursued college or postsecondary may experience, because of these key findings that emerged from the data.

Interpretation of the Findings

The ecological model of systems theory describes how individuals are directly associated and impacted by their environment through multiple systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I used this model to identify how African American men, ages 18–24 from single parent households describe their environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. Neighborhood issues such as crime, poverty, and violence often are contributing factors that can hinder or disrupt social and academic

success for African American men (Brooms, 2015; Flecther & Moore, 2021; D. E. Thomas et al., 2021).

Violence in the Neighborhood

According to my findings, neighborhood violence was an emerging key factor that contributed to these young African American men's pursuit of higher education, as reporting that their neighborhoods were rough, drug-infested, and riddled with gun violence and gang issues. These barriers were prevalent in their neighborhoods, causing mental distress and the inability to focus and thrive in the classrooms. These findings are also highlighted in the literature reporting how environmental stress can cause negative educational outcomes for African American men in low socioeconomic neighborhoods with high crime and violence (Bennett, 2019; King et al., 2019). Much of the research that has been conducted on African American men has been utilized with critical race theory as the framework at predominately White institutions (Allen, 2020), resiliency framework related to academic success at HBCUs (Irvine, 2019), and surveys with high school students in preparation for college (Hines et al., 2020). The current research extends knowledge as there is a lack of research on African American men who have not attended college or postsecondary institutions.

Teacher and Administrative Support

I found that issues related to teacher and administrative support were key findings and were consistent with current research, as well as extending new knowledge. Many of the participants reported that they had no support from teachers, no support from administration, no teacher interaction and they did not feel that they were valued or

taught well. Current research posits that, for students to have a positive learning experience, it is important that the relationship involving the student and teacher is trusting and supportive (Brooms, 2021a; Cain & Truth, 2022). As it relates to extending new knowledge in building from the current literature, this previous research was conducted with college students within a technical degree program (Cain & Truth, 2022) and looking at African American men who have graduated from college or currently enrolled in college (Brooms, 2021a; Brooms, 2021b). Moreover, my research looked at African American men who have not attended college or postsecondary institutions, which supports the need for these participants' voices to be heard from their perspective and how they make meaning of their school experiences.

Limited College Preparation and Understanding of the Admission Process

An additional key finding was the limited college preparation and understanding of the college admission process that the participants reported not having from their teachers and school staff such as guidance counselors. Consequently, the lack of awareness about college or postsecondary education opportunities posits as a barrier of the participants reporting the limited teacher and administrative support. Having little to no interaction or trusting relationships with their teachers suggests a systemic barrier intersecting within the literature regarding African American men feeling unsupported, invisible, and devalued from a societal perspective (T. R. Buckley, 2018; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Moreover, this speaks to a larger systemic/macro issue, which posits young African American men as lacking motivation, lacking the ability to succeed academically, and being uneducable (Win et al., 2022).

The responses from many of the participants reflected much of the research that was captured in the literature review. Some of the responses from the participants were that college was not on the forefront, and there was no emphasis on college. As a result of these participants' responses, there were missed opportunities to engage them and inform them about college or postsecondary opportunities when they were in high school. The literature speaks to the importance of introducing precollege tools, information, and resources to students, specifically African Americans to provide them with access to college and postsecondary opportunities (Cain & Truth, 2022; Goings & Sewell, 2019).

Mentors and Role Models for African American Young Men

Mentors and role models are extremely important for African American young men who reside in single parent households within low socioeconomic neighborhoods. All participants in the current study reported being raised by women and, many reporting the lack of a father/male role model in their lives. There is a great need for male support in the home environment, as research posits that having a father/male figure in the household contributes to greater academic success for young African American men (Robinson, 2021). This is also true for schools, where there are only approximately 2% of male teachers within the school system (National Center for Education, nd). In more context with this key finding was that many of the participants reported having no role models, or the streets as role models. This continues to be reflected in the literature, for example, Fletcher and Moore's (2021) positing of drug dealers and coaches as role models.

Ecological Model of Systems Theory

The ecological model of systems theory is a theoretical framework, designed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, which describes the individual development as occurring within the dynamics of interlinking and intersecting systems. These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For the purposes of this general qualitative research study, the researcher conducted the study from lens of the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem involves the individual, in which case, from this study, would be the African American man, age 18–24. The mesosystem involves the people closest to the microsystem, in which this case, would be the single parent. The macrosystem involves the larger societal construct that informs societal norms, policies, views, and beliefs. In this study, the macrosystem entails the environment, and systems within the context of the neighborhood and the school system in which the African American men lived, interacted, and were raised. The research question of this study was, How do African American men, ages 18–24, raised in single parent households, describe their environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education.

This general qualitative research study was conducted utilizing semi structured interviews, which aligns with qualitative research, and allows for the researcher to gather rich and thick data from the perspective of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I interviewed 15 African American men who had not attended college or any postsecondary institute. I transcribed the interviews via hand-transcription and NVivo qualitative software. During the completion of the transcription process, the researcher

utilized member-checking with the participants and reflexive journaling to ensure accurate and truthful data from the participants perspective. Through coding and thematic analysis, I illuminated five themes: neighborhood violence, teacher/administrative support, college preparation, college admission process, and role models/mentors. These five themes yielded four key findings: violence in neighborhoods, teacher administrative support, limited college preparation and understanding of college admission process, and mentors/role models for African American men.

Environmental barriers, described by the participants highlighted negative structures within their neighborhoods, such as being violent, infested with drugs, and being tough to survive. This speaks to a larger macrosystem issue where opportunities and resources are limited in low-income neighborhoods, leaving young African American men with limited support and services to help them navigate a difficult environment. Compounding these issues highlight that the lack of male role models and mentors in these neighborhoods influence negative circumstance, thereby exacerbating a system with negative barriers and impediments. Consequently, the microsystem (African American male) and the macrosystem (neighborhood/environment) are influenced by negative constructs, which disrupts the early system of the African American man. Neighborhood violence and lack of male role models/mentors in these young African American men's lives, give way to, mental health stressors, fear, and the inability to focus academically due to having to navigate stressful environments with no male support. The participants' responses suggest the difficulties to achieve academically or focus on college with these environmental challenges.

Additionally, and just as important, is the lack of teacher/administrative support, when these young men were in high school. This dynamic speaks also to a macro-level systemic issue that suggests that their interaction, support, and relationships with the school system environment was less than stellar/favorable, and not much of a pleasant experience, as feeling marginalized, devalued, disregarded, not heard, and dismissed as not being able to achieve academically in high school, thereby rendering and minimizing their college aspirations as not being an option. Considering the interactions, involvement and beliefs that are socially constructed through the ecological model of systems theory, speaks to a greater need for policy change with cultural competence trainings for teachers/administrators; intentional neighborhood safety initiatives in low-income communities, such as male mentoring programs, after-school programs, and sports clubs' programs.

Limitations of the Study

Trustworthiness in qualitative research involves capturing data that is valid and represents the views of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In conducting this research, I utilized member-checking and reflexive journals to best control for biases and misinterpretation from the researcher. As an African American man, I understood that my views and assumptions/perceptions needed to be bracketed in order to ensure that the data reflected the true meaning from the participants perspective. The limitations of this general qualitative study posit that this study was specific to only one zip-code (29203). Different zip codes in surrounding geographic areas may provide different perceptions and/or meanings from participants. Additionally, this general

qualitative study only looked at 15 African American men, ages 18–24 that were raised in single parent households, that did not attend college. It is possible that different accounts or perspective may have been gathered from an expanded age range of African American men, different geographic areas, and possibly with a larger sample-size.

Recommendations

This general qualitative study looked at African American men, ages 18–24 who resided in single parent households and how they describe their environmental and systemic barriers in relation to pursuing a postsecondary education. Participants in the current study reported negative environmental issues such as rough neighborhoods, violence, and drugs. I recommend the provision of local government and community resources to create or increase current neighborhood safety initiatives, crime prevention support; after-school programs, and sports programs to help reduce crime, violence, and other neighborhood issues that negatively impacts African American men. According to Brooms (2015), and D. E. Thomas et al. (2021), risk factors such as violence and crime in urban neighborhoods often contribute to lack of academic success due to having to navigate such barriers due to their environmental living conditions. Additionally, providing more educational resources outside of school, such as holding college community fairs/events in the actual neighborhoods, could be beneficial and adds additional opportunities to support young African American men who have not attended postsecondary institutions.

Many of the participants reported having little to no role models or mentors in their lives. I recommend that supporting mentoring groups such as a boy’s mentoring

club and local organizations that have heavy and intentional focus on young men's growth and empowerment initiatives be created or improved to increase positive initiatives in these local neighborhoods to support young African American men. According to Fletcher and Moore (2021), research was conducted with high school students who were seeking meaningful relationships and male role models outside of the home due to the absence of their fathers in their lives and how they expressed this as a significant barrier. This existing literature evidenced itself in my research as it related to my participants and how they expressed the lack of their father or a male figure as a role model.

To support teachers and administrators who work in schools where African American students comprise of most of the student population, I recommend developing or increasing diversity/cultural competency training for teachers and administrators who work with under-resourced and often marginalized school districts. More than 80% of teachers in the United States are of non-African descent, and mostly female (Childs, 2019; Henderson et al., 2023), therefore it is important to increase or create diversity and cultural competency trainings to help educate teachers on how different cultures navigate their spaces and how they learn information. For example, African American men who learn by interaction and hands-on, may not necessarily be accustomed to learning by giving them verbal and/or reading instructions and expecting them to learn in one particular style. Diversity and cultural competence speak to understanding the complexities and various ways to interact and communicate with persons of a different cultures in order to better understand their experiences and their environment. An

additional recommendation would be for schools to provide an introductory college information course or class module that can be embedded within specific courses (i.e. social science, civics course, elective, etc.) at the junior entry or senior entry level.

This general qualitative study has limitations, such as were mentioned in the above section. Towards that end, these are recommendations for future research. Future research could be conducted by expanding the age-range group of African American men, which may garner different perspectives for participants, for example, research could be conducted with high school seniors who reside in single parent homes and are undecided about attending college or postsecondary education. Additional research could be conducted with African American men from single parent homes in different zip-codes, such as 29204 or 29205 to see if there are any different experiences or perspectives based upon geographical locations. This general qualitative research study utilized the ecological model of systems theory, additional research could be conducted utilizing a different type of theoretical or conceptual model and/or quantitative or mixed methods approach in order to gather varying types of data.

Implications

Social inequalities for African Americans have been historically constructed and evidenced throughout this country, more specifically as it relates to African American men. With recent legislation regarding the banning of African American Advanced Placement courses across certain states, this construct continues to stain the fabric of this country and seeks to conceal and redact African American history in real time. This general qualitative study of elevating and lifting the voices of young African American

men in learning how they make meaning of their experiences in pursuing a postsecondary education speaks to the implications of social change in such a time as this. Moreover, as a Walden University student I think it is critical to become a social change agent to combat negative rhetoric and social injustices. Being a social change agent and scholar–practitioner requires a strong commitment to advance and effect positive social change through community and society building for the greater global good.

This general qualitative research study seeks to inform the literature and empower and promote young African American men who have not attended college or postsecondary institutions with the belief that they are more than capable and intelligent enough to not only attend college, but to also thrive in college. Their desires, dreams, and goals matter, just as everyone in society should. They should not be marginalized or discounted or devalued just because of their diverse differences and backgrounds. This research study will look to advance social change by highlighting and advocating that: Young African American men who have not attended college want to be valued, heard, and respected by their teachers and administrators, and not to be devalued with systemic barriers within the school structure. From the input of this study, they want safer neighborhoods, where rough and tough obstacles, gun violence, and negative environmental issues are removed in order for them to focus on education and learning without having to fear for their lives or struggle to exist among the environmental stressors of rough neighborhoods.

Additionally, young African American men in my sample wanted strong male role models and mentors in their lives to help guide them and navigate their experiences

towards positive educational outcomes and to be examples that can show them that they can thrive in a society that seems to relegate them as being uneducated, unable to thrive in school, and dismissed as not being college material. As an advocate for social change, I am a firm believer that for all young African American men that: “COLLEGE CAN BE…AND IS FOR ME” and importantly, could and should be an option within reach for these young men.

Conclusion

In closing, Carter G. Woodson stated, Education is not the mere imparting of information (Woodson, 1933). As a new scholar–practitioner from Walden University, I will humbly advance knowledge and add to that quote and echo those sentiments by adding that, along with imparting information we must look at the entire system/culture of people’s identity and how they learn and understand information. With the diversity of the country, we can no longer utilize the “one-way fits all” size and look to utilize diverse and adaptable techniques that can incorporate various learning styles and cultural differences that we all have. This research seems to show that there is work to do in providing an equitable environment in supporting young African American men in invoking interest and preparing them for college.

References

Adams, B. (2022). Teacher candidates and their transformed understanding of diversity and social justice in a teacher education program. *Critical Questions in Education*, *13*(1), 60–78. https://academyforeducationalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/adams-final-1.pdf

Adams, T. R., Williams, B. K., & Lewis, C. W. (2020). "That's the point of going": A qualitative inquiry into the experiences of Black males at an early college high school. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, *31*(1), 14–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X19860210

Allen, Q. (2017). "They write me off and don't give me a chance to learn anything": Positioning, discipline, and Black masculinities in school. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *48*(3), 269–283. https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12199

Allen, Q. (2020). (In)visible men on campus: Campus racial climate and subversive Black masculinities at a predominantly White liberal arts university. *Gender and Education*, *32*(7), 843–861. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1533924

Allen, Q., & White-Smith, K. (2018). "That's why I say stay in school": Black mothers' parental involvement, cultural wealth, and exclusion in their son's schooling. *Urban Education*, *53*(3), 409–435. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917714516

Almond, L., Baugh, E., Mallette, J., & Harcourt-Medina, K. T. (2021). Together we can: Increase couple functioning for low-SES families. *The Family Journal*, *29*(2), 190–199. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720977514

Alston, M., Darity, W. A., Eckel, C. C., McNeil, L., & Sharpe, R. (2022). The effect of stereotypes on black college test scores at a historically black university. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, *194*, 408–424. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.12.005

Alvarado, S. E. (2021). The role of college-bound friends in college enrollment decisions by race, ethnicity, and gender. *American Educational Research Journal*, *58*(6), 1315–1354. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831221996669

Appling, B., & Robinson, S. (2021). K–12 school counselors utilizing critical race theory to support the racial identity development and academic achievement of African American males. *Professional School Counseling*, 25(l, Part 4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040043

Babbie, E. (2021). *Practice of social research* (15th ed). Cengage Learning.

Bell, E., & Gandara, D. (2021). Can free community college close racial disparities in post-secondary attainment? How Tulsa achieves affects racially minoritized student outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal*, *58*(6), 1142–1177. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211003501

Bennett, M. D. (2019). Ain't no love in the heart of the city: Compensatory quasi-adaptive coping among African American males. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *29*(2), 234–244. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2018.1503986

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2000). Ecological systems theory. In A. E. Kazdin (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Vol. 3, pp. 129–133). Oxford University Press.

Brooms, D. R., Clark, J. S., & Druery, J. E. (2021). "We can redefine ourselves": Enhancing Black college men's persistence through counterspaces. *Journal of Black Studies*, *52*(3), 277–295. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720976410

Brooms, D. R. (2021a). Connecting with my Brothers: Exploring Black men's community, bonding, and identities in college. *Gender & Education*, *33*(7), 798–813. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1837347

Brooms, D. R. (2021b). "He wanted everybody to succeed": Black males, relational trust, and school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040035

Brooms, D. R., & Davis, A. R. (2017). Staying focused on the goal: Peer bonding and faculty mentors supporting Black males' persistence in college. *Journal of Black Studies*, *48*(3), 305–326. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934717692520

Brooms, D. R. (2015). "We Didn't Let the Neighborhood Win": Black Male Students' Experiences in Negotiating and Navigating an Urban Neighborhood. *Journal of Negro Education*, *84*(3), 269–281. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.84.3.0269

Buckley, R. (2022). Ten steps for specifying saturation in qualitative research. *Social Science & Medicine*, *309*, Article 115217. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115217

Buckley, T. R. (2018). Black Adolescent Males: Intersections Among Their Gender Role Identity and Racial Identity and Associations with Self-Concept (Global and School). *Child Development*, *89*(4), e311–e322.

Bumbacco, C., & Scharfe, E. (2023). Why Attachment Matters: First Year Post-Secondary Students' Experience of Burnout, Disengagement, and Drop-out. *Journal of College Student Retention, Theory & Practice,* Vol. 24(4) 988-1001.

Burkholder, G. J., Cox, K. A., & Crawford, L.M. (2016). *The scholar-practitioner's guide to research design*. Baltimore, MD: Laureate Publishing.

Burt, B. A., Williams, K. L., & Smith, W. A. (2018). Into the storm: ecological and sociological impediments to Black Males' Persistence in Engineering Graduate Programs. *American Educational Research Journal*, *55*(5), 965–1006.

Bush, V. L., & Bush, E. C. (2018). A Paradigm Shift? Just Because the Lion is Talking Doesn't Mean that He isn't Still Telling the Hunter's Story: African American Male Theory and the Problematics of Both Deficit and Nondeficit Models. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *9*(1), 1–18.

Bryant, D., & Wilson, A. (2020). Factors Potentially Influencing Discipline Referral and Suspensions at an Affiliated Charter High School. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, *10*(1), 119–128.

Byrd, J. A., Washington, A. R., Williams, J. M., & Lloyd, C. (2021). Reading Woke: Exploring How School Counselors May Use Bibliotherapy With Adolescent Black Boys. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040031

Cain, C. C., & Trauth, E. M. (2022). The pursuit of tech degrees for Black Men in the United States: Belonging and happiness, an individual differences study. *Technology in Society*, *69*, N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2021.101835

Carey, R. L. (2020). Missing misters: uncovering the pedagogies and positionalities of male teachers of color in the school lives of Black and Latino adolescent boys. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, *23*(3), 392–413. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1663991

Carey, R. L. (2022). "Whatever You Become, Just Be Proud of It." Uncovering the Ways Families Influence Black and Latino Adolescent Boys' Postsecondary Future Selves. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *37*(1), 59–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211018450

Chan, C. D., Ngadjui, O. T., Jackson, T., & Steen, S. (2021). Unsettling Complex Inequities on School Climate for Males of Color: School Counseling Applications From an Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040029

Comeaux, E., Chapman, T. K., & Contreras, F. (2020). The College Access and Choice Processes of High-Achieving African American Students: A Critical Race Theory Analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, *57*(1), 411–439.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). Research design: *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2018). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. (2019). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, Inc.

Danforth, L., & Miller, J. (2018). African American males from female-headed households: Using family resilience to navigate their way to college. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *21*(1), 63–79.

Davis, J., & Allen, K. M. (2020). Culturally Responsive Mentoring and Instruction for Middle School Black Boys in STEM Programs. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *11*(2), 43–58.

D'ORIO, W. (2022). Bringing College into High Schools. *Education Next*, *22*(3), 14–21.

Ellis, J. M., Rowley, L. L., Nellum, C. J., & Smith, C. D. (2018). From Alienation to Efficacy: An Examination of Racial Identity and Racial Academic Stereotypes Among Black Male Adolescents. *Urban Education*, *53*(7), 899–928. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915602538

Fletcher, E. C., & Hernandez-Gantes, V. M. (2021). They're moving in spaces they're not used to: Examining the racialized experiences of African American students in a high school STEAM Academy. *Education and Urban Society*, *53*(3), 357–376. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124520928610

Fletcher, E. C., Jr., & Moore, J. L., III. (2021). Lived Experiences of Low-Income, African American Males in a High School STEAM Academy: Implications for School Counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040030

Fletcher, E. C., Jr. & Tan, T. X. (2021). Black Lives Matter: Examining an Urban High School STEAM Academy Supporting African American Students, Families, and Communities using a Healing-Centered Approach. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, *13*(1), 41–54. https://doi.org/10.29034/ijmra.v13n1a2

Gale, A. (2020). Examining Black adolescents' perceptions of in-school racial discrimination: The role of teacher support on academic outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *116*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105173

Grace, J. E., & Nelson, S. L. (2019). "Tryin'' to Survive": Black Male Students' Understandings of the Role of Race and Racism in the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *Leadership & Policy in Schools*, *18*(4), 664–680.

Gaylord-Harden, N. K., Barbarin, O., Tolan, P. H., & Murry, V. M. (2018). Understanding development of African American boys and young men: Moving from risks to positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, *73*(6), 753–767.

Gilfillan, B. H., Das, B., Erickson, D., & Gupta, K. (2021). Involving families in the postsecondary planning process: A case study. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211050413

Goings, R. B. (2016). (Re)Defining the Narrative: High-Achieving Nontraditional Black Male Undergraduates at a Historically Black College and University. *Adult Education Quarterly: A Journal of Research and Theory*, *66*(3), 237–253.

Goings, R. B., & Sewell, C. J. P. (2019). Outside Connections Matter: Reflections on the College Choice Process for Gifted Black Students from New York City. *High School Journal*, *102*(3), 189–209. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2019.0006

Griffin, D., Williams, J. M., & Bryan, J. (2021). School–Family–Community Partnerships for Educational Success and Equity for Black Male Students. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040036

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field methods*, 18(1), 59-82.

Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLoS ONE*, *15*(5), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076

Gwathney, A. N. (2021). Offsetting Racial Divides: Adolescent African American Males & Restorative Justice Practices. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *49*(3), 346–355. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00794-z

Hackett, E. M., Ponterotto, J. G., Zusho, A., & Jackson, M. A. (2018). Rising Out of the Gap: Early Adolescent Black Males and Academic Success. *Qualitative Report*, *23*(10), 2561–2585. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3574

Harris, P. C., Seward, M. D., Mayes, R. D., Elopre, L., & Wengert, E. (2021). “We Got to Do Better”: Interactions Between School Counselors and Black Male Student-Athletes. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040037

Heidelburg, K., & Collins, T. A. (2023). Development of Black to Success: A Culturally Enriched Social Skills Program for Black Adolescent Males. *School Psychology Review*, *52*(3), 316–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.2001691

Henderson, D. X., Baxter, S., Gordon-Littréan, B., Bingham Flemmings, J., & Edwards, C. (2023). “Push through everything”: using phenomenological inquiry to investigate how Black males’ socioecology and identities promote perseverance in the U. S. public education system. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, *26*(5), 602–622. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798383

Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, *292*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523

Hines, E. M., Cooper, J. N., & Corral, M. (2019). Overcoming the Odds: First-Generation Black and Latino Male Collegians’ Perspectives on Pre-College Barriers and Facilitators. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *13*(1), 51–69.

Hines, E. M., Harris, P. C., Mayes, R. D., & Moore, J. L., III. (2020). I think of college as setting a good foundation for my future: Black males navigating the college decision making process. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *14*(2), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-09-2019-0064

Hines, E. M., Hines, M. R., Moore III, J. L., Steen, S., Singleton II, P., Cintron, D., Golden, M. N., Traverso, K., Wathen, B.-J., & Henderson, J. (2020). Preparing African American Males for College: A Group Counseling Approach. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 45*(2), 129–145.

Huerta, A. H., McDonough, P. M., & Allen, W. R. (2018). "You can go to college": Employing a developmental perspective to examine how young men of color construct a college-going identity. *The Urban Review, 50*(5), 713-734. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-018-0466-9

Irvine, F. R., III. (2019). Academic Success of African American Males in a Historically Black University. *Journal of African American Studies, 23*(3), 203–216.

Jacob, S. A., & Furgeson, S. P. (2012). Writing interview protocols and conducting interviews: Tips for students new to the field of qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report,* 17(42), 1-10.

James, C. E. (2019). Adapting, Disrupting, and Resisting: How Middle School Black Males Position Themselves in Response to Racialization in School. *Canadian Journal of Sociology, 4*, 373.

James, M. C., Wandix White, D., Waxman, H., Rivera, H., & Harmon Jr., W. C. (2022). Remixing Resilience: A Critical Examination of Urban Middle School Learning Environments among Resilient African American Learners. *Urban Education*, *57*(3), 432–462. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085921991632

Johnson, A., Kuhfeld, M., & King, G. (2022). Measuring Middle School Achievement Trajectories for College Readiness. *Educational Policy*, *36*(7), 1702–1730. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211006833

King, K. M., Key-Hagan, M., Desai, A., Mundy, T., Shittu, A. K., Roberts, L. R., Montgomery, S., Clarke, M., Idoate, R., Michaud, T. L., Ramos, A. K., Strong, S., Thorpe, R. J., Jr., & Montgomery, S. B. (2022). Stress correlates related to depressive symptoms among young Black men in Southern California. *American Journal of Men's Health*, *16*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883221097801

Kliewer, W., & Robins, J. L. (2022). Adverse Childhood Experiences Are Associated with Cardiometabolic Risk Indicators and Telomere Length in Low-Income African American Adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *29*(1), 131–135. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-021-09978-w

Knight-Manuel, M. G., Marciano, J. E., Wilson, M., Jackson, I., Vernikoff, L., Zuckerman, K. G., & Watson, V. W. M. (2019). "It's All Possible": Urban Educators' Perspectives on Creating a Culturally Relevant, Schoolwide, College-Going Culture for Black and Latino Male Students. *Urban Education*, *54*(1), 35–64.

Lateef, H., Brugger, L., Boyd, D., Gale, A., & Williams, E.-D. (2022). Affective Orientation and School Persistence Among African American Youth: Implications for Afrocentric Youth Research and Practice. *Journal of African American Studies*, *26*(1), 4–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-021-09569-9

Lehmann, P. S., & Meldrum, R. C. (2021). School Suspension in Florida: The Interactive Effects of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Academic Achievement. *JQ: Justice Quarterly*, *38*(3), 479–512. https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2019.1688853

Marsh, L. T. S., & Noguera, P. A. (2018). Beyond Stigma and Stereotypes: An Ethnographic Study on the Effects of School-Imposed Labeling on Black Males in an Urban Charter School. *Urban Review*, *50*(3), 447–477.

Minor, K. A., Griffin, C. B., & Benner, A. D. (2021). Stop, Drop, or Enroll? How Ability Beliefs Are Associated With College-Going Among Black Males. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040034

Moreno, G. (2021). Stemming exclusionary school discipline: implementing culturally attuned positive behavior practices. *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties*, *26*(2), 176–186. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2021.1930907

National Center for Education and Statistics (n.d). https://nces.ed.gov/

Nelson, K. L., Morris, J. R., Brinson, J., & Stahl, M. A. (2020). School-Community Group Model: Collaborating for the Empowerment of Adolescent African American Male Students. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 45*(2), 113–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1740848

Nojan, S. (2020). Why ethnic studies? Building critical consciousness among middle school students. *Middle School Journal*, *51*(2), 25–35.

Okilwa, N., & Robert, C. (2017). School Discipline Disparity: Converging Efforts for Better Student Outcomes. *Urban Review*, *49*(2), 239–262. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-017-0399-8

Orrock, J., & Clark, M. A. (2018). Using Systems Theory to Promote Academic Success for African American Males. *Urban Education*, *53*(8), 1013–1042.

Outland, R. (2022). Schools as jails: Urban African American Adolescent Males' (UAAM) experiences and perceptions of violence in low-income public schools. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *50*(2), 82–93. https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12248

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and methods*: Integrating theory and practice*. *Sage.*

Powell, H. O. (2018). The Influence of Selected Noncognitive Variables on the Academic Success of African American High School Males. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *9*(1), 40–70.

Ravitch, S.M. & Carl, N.M. (2016). Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2021). Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological. Sage Publications.

Rigg, K. K., McNeish, R., Schadrac, D., Gonzalez, A., & Tran, Q. (2019). Community needs of minority male youth living in inner-city Chicago. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *98*, 284–289. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.011

Reynolds-Vassar, R. E., Barnett III, C., & Johnson, S. L. (2021). Qualitative Exploration of Black Middle-Class Males' Experiences in Suburban Schools. *Negro Educational Review*, *72*(1–4), 27–69.

Robinson, Q. L. (2021). Exploring Parental Identities: How Single Black Males Understand Fatherhood in the Absence of Their Fathers. *Journal of Black Studies*, *52*(8), 820–839. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347211029311

Robson, K., Anisef, P., Brown, R. S., & Nagaoka, J. (2019). A Comparison of Factors Determining the Transition to Postsecondary Education in Toronto and Chicago. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *14*(3), 338–356.

Rogers, L. O., & Brooms, D. R. (2020). Ideology and Identity Among White Male Teachers in an All-Black, All-Male High School. *American Educational Research Journal*, *57*(1), 440–470. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219853224

Roy, Raver, Masucci, & Dejoseph (2019). "If They Focus on Giving Us a Chance in Life We Can Actually Do Something in This World": Poverty, Inequality, and Youths' Critical Consciousness. *Developmental Psychology, Vol 55(3).*

Richardson, S., Jones-Fosu, S., & Lewis, C. W. (2019). Black Men are Present. Examining Enrollment Patterns in Education Degree Programs. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 10(1), 20–36.

Ryan, M., Rowan, L., Lunn Brownlee, J., Bourke, T., L'Estrange, L., Walker, S., & Churchward, P. (2022). Teacher Education and Teaching for Diversity: A Call to Action. *Teaching Education*, *33*(2), 194–213.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Sandles Jr., D. (2020). Using Critical Race Theory to Explore the Black Men Teacher Shortage. *Journal of Negro Education*, *89*(1), 67–81. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.89.1.0067

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & quantity*, *52*(4), 1893–1907. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8

Schneider, B., & Saw, G. (2016). Racial and Ethnic Gaps in Postsecondary Aspirations and Enrollment. *The Russel Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5), 58-82.

Simmons-Reed, E. A., & Cartledge, G. (2014). School Discipline Disproportionality: Culturally Competent Interventions for African American Males. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *4*(2), 95–109.

Slaten, C. D., Zalzala, A., Elison, Z. M., Tate, K.A., & Wachter Morris, C.A. (2016). Person-centered educational practices in an urban alternative high school: The Black male perspective. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 15(1), 19.

South Carolina School Report Card. https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/sc-school-report-card/

Storlie, C. A., Albritton, K., Cureton, J. L., & Byrd, J. A. (2019). African American and Latino Male Youth: Perceived Strengths in Career Exploration. *Journal of Counselor Practice*, *10*(2), 22–50. https://doi.org/10.22229/aal1022019

Stumper, A., Mac Giollabhui, N., Abramson, L. Y., & Alloy, L. B. (2020). Early pubertal timing mediates the association between low socioeconomic status and poor attention and executive functioning in a diverse community sample of adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *49*(7), 1420–1432. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01198-x

Szkody, E., Steele, E. H., & McKinney, C. (2021). Race and gender: Perception and reception of support from family and friends. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, *7*(4), 435–450. https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000251

Thomas, A., Caldwell, C. H., Jagers, R. J., & Flay, B. R. (2016). It's in My Hood: Understanding African American Boys' Perception of Safety in Their Neighborhoods. *Journal of Community Psychology, 44*(3), 311–326. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21768

Thomas, D. E., Bradshaw, C. P., Bottiani, J. H., McDaniel, H. L., & Debnam, K. J. (2021). Coping Power in the City: Promoting Coping in African American Male Students. *Professional School Counseling*, *25*(1 part_4), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211040002

United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html

United States Department of Education. (n.d). https://www.ed.gov/

Vereen, L. G., Giovannetti, M. R., & Bohecker, L. (2020). A paradigm shift: Supporting the multidimensional identities of Black male youth. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, *45*(2), 99–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1740847

Wallace, D., Bol, L., Hall, K., & Cousins, E. (2022). Black Male Educators Matter: Modeling and Expectations in K-12 Settings. *Journal of African American Males in Education, 13*(2), 1–19.

Wallace, D. L., & Gagen, L. M. (2020). African American Males' Decisions to Teach: Barriers, Motivations, and Supports Necessary for Completing a Teacher Preparation Program. *Education and Urban Society*, *52*(3), 415–432.

Wäsche, H., Niermann, C., Bezold, J., & Woll, A. (2021). Family health climate: a qualitative exploration of everyday family life and health. *BMC Public Health*, *21*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11297-4

Webster, C., & Knaus, C. B. (2020). "I Don't Think They Like Us": School Suspensions as Anti-Black Male Practice. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *12*(1), 66–88.

Woodson, C.G. (1933). The Mis-Education of the Negro. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press

Appendix Principal Interview Protocol

Greetings: My name is Mr. Felix A. Weston, and I thank you for willing to participate in this research study to explore young African American males' perceptions of seeking a college education. I will be conducting the interview, which should take no longer than one hour. During this interview, I will be asking open-ended questions as well as closed-ended questions in order to gather rich thick information. As stated in the consent form, this interview will be audio recorded. Also, as noted in the consent form, you can voluntarily stop the interview at any time. A copy of this interview will be provided to you after it is transcribed and reviewed together for accuracy. Below are the questions that I have constructed, and with your permission, we can start the interview.

1. What elements or events in your environment did you consider as barriers to pursuing post-secondary education?
    a. Neighborhood?
    b. Home Support?
    c. Role Models in or out of school?
2. What elements or events within the school system did you consider as barriers to pursuing post-secondary education?
    a. School suspensions?
    b. School policies and procedures?
    c. School teachers?
3. Did you have any experience with being taught by African American male teachers during your high school education?

   a. If yes, can you share with me your experience with being taught by them?
   b. How did that experience influence your interest in pursuing post-secondary education?
   c. What were some of the obstacles/barriers you experienced in school?
4. Did you have any experience with being taught by non-African American male teachers during your high school education?
   a. If yes, can you share with me your experience with being taught by them?
   b. How did that experience influence your interest in pursuing post-secondary education?
5. Did your parent graduate or attend any college or technical school?
   a. Did their experience motivate you to want to attend college?
   b. Do you have siblings that graduated or attended college?
   c. Do you have any childhood friends that graduated or attended college?
   d. Have you ever visited a college campus?
6. During your high school years, how did your teachers prepare you for college?
   a. How did your guidance counselors prepare you for college?
   b. Did your classmates try to motivate you to attend college?
7. Did you take the ACT or SAT in high school?
   a. Did you take any college-preparation courses?

   b. Did your high school have any college fairs?

8. Tell me about your understanding of the college and/or technical school admission process?
   a. Did you visit any college campuses?
9. What goals did you have of attending college?
   a. From your experience, what were the barriers that prevented you from attending college?
   b. How did your high school prepare you for college?
10. Did you want to attend college?
   a. If yes, Why?
   b. If no, Why Not?
11. Is there anything that you would like to share before the closing of the interview?