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College of Education and Human Sciences

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Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on the Challenges of Closing the African

American Achievement Gap

by

Cherie D. McElroy-Burch

MS, Western Governors University, 2020

BS, Western Governors University, 2017

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

There is a persistent academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. Federal and state governments have made numerous efforts, implemented policy changes, and allocated more resources to struggling school districts, yet the disparity in academic achievement persists. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The conceptual framework for this study was based on Coll and Lamberty's model of developmental competencies in minority children. The research question for this study focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. For this basic qualitative design, one-on-one semistructured interviews were conducted to collect data from 13 early childhood teachers with 9 or more years of experience. Thematic analysis was used to identify open and axial codes and to analyze the data. From the analysis, three themes emerged: (a) teachers believe they can close the achievement gap; (b) teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations; (c) teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed. Applying the study's findings may contribute to broader social change as teacher preparation programs, school leaders, teachers, and policymakers use the findings to make decisions on policy and procedures focused on the importance of intentional, culturally relevant instructional practices to support African American students' academic achievement and close the achievement gap.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this research to the memory of my grandfathers, James Swafford and Fred Caffie. I carry your strength and wisdom every day and wish you were here to celebrate this moment. To my grandmothers, Marcie whose faith in God and love of education shaped my path as a teacher, and Thelma, whose faith, strong will and determination taught me to trust God, stay focused and never give up.

To my Mommy and Daddy, Vickie and Daniel McElroy, my bonus mom Terrie Mac, and my brothers, Marcellus, Joshua, and Danny, thank you for your love, encouragement, and for always believing in me. To my husband, Robert, my greatest cheerleader and voice of reason. Thank you for supporting my dream, pushing me to go further, and standing beside me through every challenge. To my children, Jamil, Jayla, Jade, and Jaden, you are my inspiration. Your love kept me moving forward and striving to achieve more.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The persistent achievement gap between African American students and their White peers continues to be a significant challenge within the U.S. education system (Bryant et al., 2023). Although earlier data suggested a narrowing of the achievement gap (Bjorklund-Young & Plasman, 2020; Hanushek et al., 2019), more recent evidence indicates that this progress has not only stalled but, in some cases, reversed, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Student growth rates have declined below prepandemic levels, and achievement gaps have continued to widen, in some instances surpassing previously recorded low points (Reardon et al., 2024). According to researchers, African American students have underperformed in educational settings compared to their peers (Cabral-Gouveia, 2023; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019).

Researchers have suggested that consistent patterns in achievement gaps between African American and White students are present at the start of kindergarten and rarely change over the school years (Boda et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2023; Temple et al., 2022). Students who displayed academic difficulties in primary grades were more likely to develop behavior problems and experience ongoing challenges throughout their educational career, such as missed instruction time, placement in lower-level classes, or dropping out of school (Pearman et al., 2019). Teachers have implemented strategies to help close the African American achievement gap (Hanson et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021); however, more instructional strategies and information are needed. In this research study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the

challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American and White students in Grades 1–3. Early childhood teachers may use the findings to make adjustments to their teaching strategies concerning African American students, leading to positive social change. Stakeholders may also use the information gathered when making curriculum and professional development decisions.

In this chapter, I present background information on the achievement gap between African American and White students, the problem statement, and the research question. The conceptual framework being used to guide the study is then briefly explained. This chapter also includes a discussion of the nature of the study, key terms, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the research. I conclude the chapter with a summary.

### **Background**

Scholars have explored the educational experiences, environmental influences, and resulting consequences that contribute to the gap between African American students and their White peers (Bañales et al., 2020; Henry et al., 2020; Husband & Kang, 2020). Husband and King (2020) argued that a significant amount of research on African American boys in U.S. classrooms highlighted their deficits or pathologies, portraying African American boys as more “at-risk” of school failure than other student groups. This evidence from previous research implied that there was a need to address the obstacles hindering the academic success of African American students.

Despite numerous efforts by the federal and state governments, policy changes, and increased resources allocated to struggling school districts, the disparity in academic

achievement remains (Hanson et al., 2020). Findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2022) indicated a persistent racial achievement gap between African American and White students dating back to the 1970s, a disparity that continues (Reardon et al., 2024). These findings are significant because they highlighted the enduring nature of the achievement gap, emphasizing its historical and ongoing presence (Hanushek et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). When African American students consistently underperform compared to their peers, it can have a negative effect on the overall quality of education in classrooms (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Not addressing the problem will widen the achievement gap, causing African American students to continue to fall behind academically (Hanushek et al., 2019). Duncan et al. (2019) emphasized that the persistence of the achievement gap threatens the upward socioeconomic advancement of African American children.

There is limited research focused on the resources teachers need to close the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers (Bjorklund et al., 2020; Dietrichson et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023). To close the achievement gap, teachers require ample resources and effective instructional strategies to empower them in promoting inclusive learning environments and to reduce academic disparities between African American students and their White peers (Scott et al., 2019). Additionally, teacher shortages, as well as teachers with lower qualifications and less experience, particularly in schools with high proportions of African American students, were also associated with lower achievement levels (Hanson et al., 2020; Hanushek et al., 2019).

Concerns regarding resources and teachers' qualifications are not the only obstacles in closing the achievement gap. Limited research has focused on the resources teachers need to close the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers (Bjorklund et al., 2020; Dietrichson et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023). The gap in the literature related to the practice states that future research should encompass teachers' perspectives of classroom practices and supports needed to address effective strategies and learning opportunities used to close the achievement gap for African American students (Acosta & Duggins, 2019). I conducted this study to address this gap and provide educational stakeholders with early childhood teachers' perspectives on the problem and on what resources are needed to close the achievement gap for their African American students.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite numerous efforts to close the achievement gap between African American and White early childhood students, African American students continue to poorly perform academically (Cabral-Gouveia, 2023; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2020; NCES, 2022; Scott et al., 2019). The academic achievement gap trends between African American students and their White counterparts are evident in districts across the United States and are present as early as the elementary years (Assari et al., 2021; Atteberry et al., 2021; Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023; Hung et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023; Temple et al., 2022; Wint et al., 2022).

Several factors contribute to the achievement gap between African American and White students. One significant factor is socioeconomic disparities. Research has shown

that African American students are more likely to attend schools with limited resources and high poverty rates, which can hinder educational opportunities (Cook et al., 2021; NCES, 2020; Scott et al., 2019). Another factor is unequal access to quality early childhood education, which has been linked to long-term educational outcomes (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM] (2019); NCES, 2020). According to the NCES (2020), African American children are less likely to have access to high-quality preschool programs than White children. Additionally, systemic factors, such as implicit bias and racial stereotypes, can influence teacher expectations and classroom interactions, further contributing to the achievement gap (Bañales et al., 2020; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Reardon et al., 2019).

Multiple studies have indicated that African American students fall behind their White counterparts in academic performance. The NCES (2020) reported that, on average, African American students consistently perform lower than their White peers in critical subjects, such as mathematics and reading. Aligning with the NCES's findings, Reardon et al. (2019) analyzed national assessment data and found that African American students score lower than White students on mathematics and reading assessments. While examining national assessment data from 2009 to 2016, Atteberry et al. (2021) found significant achievement gaps between African American students' and their White peers starting in third grade. Atteberry also found that White students consistently outperformed their African American peers in mathematics and reading, both nationally and within school districts. Studies by both Reardon and Atteberry et al. indicated that the achievement gaps between African American and White students persisted even after

considering various factors, such as socioeconomic status and prior achievement. Rambo-Hernandez et al. (2019) explored changes in the academic gaps of approximately 60,000 students in third through fifth grades. In Wisconsin during the 2016–2017 academic year, only 1.7% of Black students achieved the “advanced” level in English language arts in contrast to 12.5% of White students (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019). They found that this discrepancy resulted in an achievement gap of nearly 11 percentage points, indicating that White students were seven times more likely than their African American peers to attain advanced scores. These previous findings emphasized the need for research focused on this achievement gap and what is needed to help close the gap.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers’ perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The constructivist paradigm was used for this study. Gretschel et al., (2023) defined the constructivist paradigm as understanding an individual’s personal viewpoints related to a phenomenon. I employed the constructivist paradigm to interview teachers in a one-on-one setting. Researchers have suggested that the African American/White study achievement gap phenomenon is a persistent and complex problem influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, access to resources, family, community, school and classroom environment, and teachers’ instructional practices (Ajiga et al., 2025; Bañales et al., 2020; Hanushek et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2020; Hung et al., 2020; NASEM, 2019; Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019). I solicited teachers of Grades 1–3 who have had

experience teaching African American students. Addressing the African American achievement gap in Grades 1–3 is important because these formative years significantly affect a child’s foundational learning and set the trajectory for future academic success (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], n.d.-c.; Sullivan et al., 2023). Addressing the gap also helps to mitigate academic disparities throughout their educational journey (Sullivan et al., 2023). According to the NAEYC, all students, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, deserve to reach their full potential. The findings from the study may be used by teacher preparation programs, school leaders, teachers, and policymakers in developing policies and practices that prioritize culturally relevant instruction to support the academic success of African American students and close the achievement gap.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this study:

RQ: What are early childhood teachers’ perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3?

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, I explored early childhood teachers’ perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The conceptual framework used to ground the study was based on Coll and Lamberty’s (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children. To promote academic achievement, student growth, and to address the achievement gap, it is

essential to prioritize the understanding of the developmental competencies of minority children. Coll and Lamberty's preliminary work on the model of developmental competencies in minority children emphasized the skills and abilities that minority children need to develop. The model was used to explain that a child's social class, culture, ethnicity, and race affect their development (Coll & Lamberty, 1996). Children from different social classes, cultures, ethnicities, and races may develop competencies in different ways, and in the model, Coll and Lamberty explained that factors, like a family's values, language, and economic resources, affect how children learn skills as they grow. In the model, looking at each child's strengths individually instead of focusing on deficits is emphasized. Coll and Lamberty explained that teachers should understand how social class, culture, ethnicity, and race influence but do not determine how minority children develop competencies. The model has five core competencies contributing to positive outcomes in minority children: (a) cultural identity, (b) bicultural competence, (c) language and literacy, (d) social competence, and (e) academic achievement (Coll & Lamberty, 1996). Coll and Lamberty's framework can inform and enrich the understanding of how teachers' classroom practices and the allocation of resources affect the developmental competencies and positive outcomes of minority students. This connection highlights the importance of teachers integrating a holistic approach to instructional practices to enhance the overall well-being and success of minority children in the academic setting.

The model of developmental competencies in minority children has been used to reveal conflicting perspectives on the academic abilities of minority students. According

to Perez-Brena (2018), before the model of developmental competencies was designed, minorities were viewed primarily through a deficit lens, which emphasized student weaknesses rather than recognizing their strengths and focuses on what students are unable to do or areas where they struggle. Perez-Brena revealed how systemic biases, prejudices, and cultural misunderstandings can cause minority students to be perceived negatively as less capable. Holtz et al. (2023) detailed how using terminology, such as “disadvantaged,” “underachieving,” “at risk,” and/or “in crisis,” to describe African American and Brown students contributes to inequality and segregation within the school. Holtz et al. further explained that deficit views of minority students are often responsible for the creation of policies to justify educational inequality and label special education students or juvenile delinquents. Shukla et al. (2022) argued that the term “achievement gap” can also indicate a deficit mindset because it can emphasize the academic differences between African American and White students. The perspective of viewing students through a deficit lens, which emphasizes students’ shortcomings or weaknesses, contradicts Coll and Lamberty’s model of developmental competencies. Coll and Lamberty’s framework emphasized the significance of nurturing positive cognitive, social, emotional, and health competencies, focusing on the development of students’ abilities and potentials rather than emphasizing perceived inadequacies. This discrepancy showed a misalignment between deficit-oriented approaches and the model of developmental competencies approach advocated by Coll and Lamberty’s model. The model of developmental competencies in minority children was valuable to the current study because it was used to provide an organizing framework for exploring early

childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers.

I used the model of developmental competencies in minority children as a guide to create the research question and the interview questions. I also applied the same model of developmental competencies as a guide to interpret and analyze the data. A more detailed analysis of the conceptual framework is included in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative research is used when the goal is to explore perspectives and gain an in-depth, detailed understanding of a topic or experience (Babbie, 2017). In this qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The primary reason to conduct qualitative research is to understand the phenomenon through the participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). Using a qualitative approach for this study was appropriate because it allowed for rich data to be gathered in the form (see Burkholder et al., 2019) of a narrative about teachers' personal experiences closing the achievement gap.

The study sample included 13 teachers who taught African American students in Grades 1–3. I recruited participants from the Walden University Participant Pool and social media teacher groups, who taught in early childhood settings with an achievement gap between African American and White students. Snowball sampling was also employed, which enabled participants to suggest individuals who could offer distinct or corroborating viewpoints from participants from schools with African American and

White achievement gaps (see Ravitch & Carl, 2020). I conducted one-on-one, semistructured interviews virtually over the online meeting platform Zoom (<https://www.zoom.com>) to collect data. One-on-one interviews allowed me to explore teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I used the Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase process to thematically analyze the data and report the patterns, connections, themes, and meanings that emerged to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Then, deductive reasoning was used to identify and organize open and axial codes to capture the underlying meaning or content of the data to answer the research question.

### **Definitions**

In this section, I list definitions of key concepts used throughout the study to help the reader understand the context of the terms used:

*Achievement gap*: The disparity in achievement levels on a state exam between White students and students of a different ethnic background, such as African Americans, expressed as a percentage difference (Bjorklund-Young & Plasman, 2020).

*Cultural competence*: The ability to interact respectfully and effectively with people from different cultures. Cultural competence promotes inclusivity, fairness, and diversity while avoiding cultural biases and stereotypes (Leo, 2023).

*Developmental competencies*: The skills, abilities, and knowledge individuals acquire and demonstrate as they grow and mature. These competencies encompass

various aspects of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Coll & Lamberty, 1996).

*Early childhood:* The initial phase of child development beginning at birth and encompassing all children from birth to the age of 8 (NAEYC, 2020).

*Early childhood education:* The period of child development from birth until around the age of 8, irrespective of specific programs, regulations, funding, or delivery methods (NAEYC, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

Scholarly research is based on certain assumptions. Researchers have a responsibility to scrutinize the assumptions that affect or guide their research (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). I assumed that participants would respond to interview questions openly and honestly. Participants were expected to provide authentic answers because verifying each response would be time consuming and resource intensive. Another assumption was that participants would share their experiences truthfully, even when discussing sensitive topics like race. Additionally, I assumed that participants would draw their responses exclusively from their own experiences and would not discuss practices employed by other teachers. It was also assumed that participants were challenged to close the achievement gap. My final assumption was that participants had a genuine interest in participating in this study. These assumptions were necessary to my study because the purpose of this study was to understand early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their

White peers, but there was no way to know whether or not responses provided were authentic, honest, or from their own experience.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of the study was early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. This study was delimited to 10–15 certified early childhood teachers who had taught or were currently licensed to teach in Grades 1–3, as indicated by the department of education in the state they teach in. The participants must also have had experience with challenges to close the achievement gap between African American and White students. I excluded teachers who had been teaching for less than 1 year. I chose to exclude these teachers because they were new to the profession and may not have been knowledgeable of the achievement gap and/or the efforts needed to close the achievement gap.

I contemplated utilizing the framework developed by Ladson-Billings and Tate in 1995, known as critical race theory, because it specifically focused on the intersection of race and education. For this reason, I did not use critical race theory. Critical race theory looked more broadly at institutional racism and unfair systems by focusing on critiquing power structures. I chose the model of developmental competencies because it specifically focused on students' development and competencies, and it could be used to provide a supportive framework to understand how culture, ethnicity, and identity positively affect learning. The model of developmental competencies in minority children is used by teachers, researchers, and practitioners in designing interventions, programs,

and strategies to foster the strengths of children from diverse backgrounds. Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children was better suited and aligned with the purpose of this study, because it emphasized how cultivating academic skills in minority children fosters achievement success (Dotterer et al., 2022). Using this framework supported the idea that focusing on essential skills and developmental competencies such as self-perception, communication abilities, and problem-solving provided an important foundation to increase African American students' academic achievement and narrow racial gaps.

Enhancing transferability was achieved by offering extensive descriptions of the data from early childhood teachers and the model of developmental competencies in minority children. This involved providing specific details about the study's implementation, such as the sample population of early childhood teachers, their settings, the sample size, inclusion criteria, sampling strategy, demographic characteristics, interview protocol, and interview excerpts. Readers can use these rich, detailed descriptions of the data and study criteria to evaluate the applicability of these findings to other research, contexts, or settings focused on the African American achievement gap in early childhood. The extensive depictions will allow readers to make informed judgments about the transferability of the results to their situation or environment.

### **Limitations**

This study was carried out with certain limitations. One limitation was the potential lack of generalizability or transferability of study findings to broader populations or contexts. Qualitative research often focuses on specific cases or contexts,

which may be challenging to apply the results universally (Mwita, 2022; Oplatka, 2021). Additionally, the dependability of qualitative findings may be affected by the subjective nature of data interpretation (Mwita, 2022). The absence of standardized procedures and the reliance on the researcher's judgment may introduce variability in the analysis, impacting the reliability of the study's conclusions. The limited use of statistical measures in basic qualitative designs can hinder the ability to make quantitative comparisons, reducing the robustness of the research (Oplatka, 2021). Without statistical data, it becomes more challenging to establish the reliability and replicability of the study's outcomes. To address these limitations, as the researcher, I employed rigorous sampling techniques, provided rich contextual descriptions, and documented the research process to enhance the transferability of findings. I also incorporated established qualitative research methods, such as member checking to ensure dependability and enhance the overall robustness and credibility of the study.

Another limitation was researcher bias, because I shared the cultural background of the students discussed in this study. This commonality represented a potential limitation, as it could have introduced bias into my analysis, data collection, and interpretation of the data. This connection could have led to biased or indifferent feelings regarding teachers' perspectives on strategies contributing to African American students' achievement gap. I consciously prevented my personal opinions from influencing the study to ensure the validity and accuracy of the participants' responses. I maintained a reflective journal to document and address any potential biases that arose throughout the research process.

An additional limitation was that participants may not have felt comfortable being completely forthcoming about their perspectives. Since the topic may be considered sensitive, some early childhood educators could have chosen to withhold their opinions and insights. I overcame this challenge by building trust and rapport with the participants and created an atmosphere of trust and safety. Participants were more likely to openly communicate because they felt comfortable and believed that their privacy was protected. All participants were assured that they could drop out of the study at any time for any reason with no repercussions. I also asked open-ended questions instead of asking closed-ended questions to allow participants to express their thoughts and feelings more freely. I let teachers know that their input was valuable.

### **Significance**

There is a gap in the literature about the practice concerning early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap for African American elementary students (Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023; Hernandez, 2022; NASEM, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2023). This study may contribute to positive social change by providing study findings that may be used by teachers to address the gap in practice such as helpful strategies to close the gap which will add information to the gap in the literature. Stakeholders may use the findings when adopting policies and creating interventions or instructional practices to assist teachers who are challenged with closing the achievement gap. The findings may be used by teacher preparation programs, school leaders, teachers, and policymakers to make decisions on policy and procedures focused on the importance of intentional, culturally relevant instructional practices to support

African American students' academic achievement and close the achievement gap in education. Applying the study's findings could contribute to broader social change by advancing educational equity, improving economic mobility, and strengthening community outcomes.

### **Summary**

A basic qualitative study was used to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The achievement gap has been a problem in education for some time (Hernandez, 2022; Hung et al., 2020; Shukla et al., 2022; Temple et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2023). In Chapter 1, I discussed the background and the nature of the study. The conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study was based on Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children; need to relate this to classroom teachers' instruction and resources. I explained the key concepts and terms that may have various meanings. I also provided the assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations that may affect the study. Chapter 2 of this study includes a description of research methods used to obtain literature, an in-depth review of the framework, and the essential terms associated with the study problem.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I present a review of the current literature to support this study's purpose to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The problem was the persistent academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3 (Hernandez, 2022; Hung et al., 2020; Shukla et al., 2022; Temple et al., 2022; Tirado & Shneyderman, 2020; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2023). The difference in academic achievement between African American students and other students has existed for a long time (Hanushek et al., 2019; NCES, 2022). While there have been some advancements in reducing this gap by the federal and state governments, such as policy changes and increased resources allocated to struggling school districts, the academic achievement gap persists for African American students (Bjorklund-Young & Plasman, 2020; Hanson et al., 2020; Hanushek et al., 2019). There needs to be more extensive research to identify teachers' classroom practices and the necessary resources for teachers to address the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers (Bjorklund et al., 2020; Dietrichson et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023). To bridge this gap, teachers require support to reduce academic disparities between African American students and their White peers (Scott et al., 2019). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3.

In this chapter, the following key concepts are explored: the history of the African American achievement gap, current reasons for the African American achievement gap, achievement gap in Grades 1–3, African American achievement gap in reading/language arts, African American achievement gap in mathematics, teachers' role in the achievement gap, race and academic achievement, teachers' perspective on African American achievement, teachers' classroom practices to close the achievement gap and teachers' classroom practices to close the achievement gap, and how student-teacher relationships influence student academic achievement. Following the exploration of key concepts, I explain the study's conceptual framework, Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children. I end the chapter with a summary based on the literature review.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The primary sources utilized to access literature-based research were online databases and books. Peer-reviewed articles were reviewed from online databases, including Walden Online Library, EBSCO, Google Scholar, Education Research Starters, Education Source, Education Resources Information Center (Eric), SAGE Journal, Taylor and Francis Online, and general Google searches. I searched each database using various terms and key phrases related to the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. While reading the articles, I kept the research question in mind, aiming to gather relevant information for the study. The key search terms that were used were: *academic disparities, achievement gap, race achievement gap, learning gap, academic achievement or academic performance or academic success, bias, prejudice or*

*discrimination or stereotypes, elementary school or primary school or grade school, cultural competence, teachers' classroom practices and resources, black or African American or African American or black American.* I conducted Boolean phrase searches to help obtain literature for the review. I also completed a search for the seminal works of Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children for the conceptual framework. The reviewed articles were published between 2019 and 2023, with a few older sources detailing the history of the achievement gap and the conceptual framework.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used Coll and Lamberty (1996) as the conceptual framework for this study. In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3 through Coll and Lamberty's model of developmental competencies in minority children. Coll and Lamberty asserted that social class, culture, ethnicity, and race provide a valuable framework for understanding how various elements such as racism, discrimination, and segregation can affect the development of minority children. Cardoso et al. (2021) argued that the model for developmental competencies in minority children extends the previous ecological developmental models of child development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to emphasize how societal ranking pertaining and possibly race can negatively affect a child's development.

Scholars who studied the model of developmental competencies in minority children examined the integration of developmental competencies holistically across

social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic domains that contribute to the overall development of minority children (Coll & Lamberty, 1996; Marks & Coll, 2018; Perez-Brena et al., 2018; Witherspoon et al., 2022). The model suggested that development is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by the following competencies (a) cultural identity, (b) bicultural competence, (c) language and literacy, (d) social competence, and (e) academic achievement. Coll and Lamberty (1996) argued that these five core competencies interact among the social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic domains, and highlight the importance of their integration when studying or promoting the development of minority children. The model for the developmental competencies in minority children focuses on the dynamic nature of development, recognizing that changes in one domain can influence and be influenced by changes in other domains (Coll & Lamberty, 1996).

The integrative model of developmental competencies in minority children focused on factors that interact to affect the development of minority students. These factors are described as “nonshared” with the majority population and have a causal effect on developmental competencies by influencing the “shared” factors such as encouraging and inhibiting environments, acculturation, child elements, and family elements (Lamberty, 1996; Kubi et al., 2022; Marks & Coll, 2018; Umana-Taylor & Hill, 2020; Witherspoon et al., 2022). Although Coll and Lamberty (1996) differentiated between nonshared and shared elements, while all factors are shared, the non-shared elements disproportionately affect minority youth negatively. The lack of attention to

these non-shared elements prompted the development of this model (Perez-Brena et al., 2018).

The model of developmental competencies in minority children was created to address the unique needs and challenges experienced by minority children in their development. According to Marks and Coll (2018) and Perez-Brena et al. (2018), minority students were compared to a White middle-class standard. The model of developmental competencies in minority children indicated that teachers prioritize the child's holistic development rather than solely emphasizing academic aspects (Marks & Coll, 2018). The model of developmental competencies in minority children has been used to investigate various aspects of child development among minority children (Coll & Lamberty, 1996; Marks & Coll, 2018; Witherspoon et al., 2022). Researchers have examined how cultural values and practices influence parenting styles, children's academic achievement, identity development, mental health outcomes, and more (Coll & Lamberty, 1996; Geller et al., 2023; Marks & Coll, 2018; Umana-Taylor & Hill, 2020; Witherspoon et al., 2022). Coll and Lamberty's framework was useful for this study because it emphasized the need for researchers, teachers, administrators, and policymakers to consider how the complex interaction of factors such as racism, discrimination, and segregation affect minority children's development (Coll & Lamberty, 1996; Marks and Coll, 2018; Perez-Brena et al., 2018; Umana-Taylor & Hill, 2020; Witherspoon et al., 2022) The model of developmental competencies in minority children indicated that teachers need to understand and address students' diverse needs and abilities (Kim et al., 2023; Steed & Kranski, 2022). Teachers should design

instructional strategies that promote the integration of different developmental competencies. For example, activities encouraging collaboration can enhance social and cognitive skills (Steed & Kranski, 2022). According to the model of developmental competencies in minority children, teachers must serve as facilitators of holistic growth by weaving developmental competencies into their daily interactions with students, fostering a comprehensive educational experience that goes beyond traditional academic learning (Coll & Lamberty, 1996; Marks & Coll, 2018).

The model of developmental competencies in minority children suggested that teachers must recognize that students develop at different rates, have unique strengths and weaknesses, and should provide individualized instruction (Coll & Lamberty, 1996). This might include evaluating where students are in their development and adjusting how they teach, what they teach with, and how they test students (Steed & Kranski, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2023). The model of developmental competencies in minority children showed that teachers are vital in promoting students' social-emotional development (Coll & Lamberty, 1996; Kim et al., 2023; Marks & Coll, 2018; Steed & Kranski, 2022). The model of developmental competencies in minority children provided a valuable framework for all educators, especially teachers, to understand how factors like racism, discrimination, and segregation can affect minority students' holistic development across social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic domains in the classroom. By recognizing and addressing the diverse needs and strengths of minority students across different aspects of their development, the incorporation of developmental competencies creates an inclusive

and supportive educational environment and helps to close the achievement gap within classrooms.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables**

#### **History of the African American Achievement Gap**

The African American achievement gap refers to the persistent disparities in academic performance and educational outcomes between African American students and their White peers (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, n.d.; Woodson & Love, 2019). The African American academic achievement gap stems from a long history of African Americans experiencing bondage, oppression, and systemic inequality (Banaji et al., 2021; Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Peer, 2024; Stern, 2023; Weissman, 2019). The institution of slavery and the subsequent implementation of Jim Crow laws in the United States significantly affected African American education.

Slavery denied African Americans access to formal education, perpetuating an ongoing cycle of educational disadvantage. In the era of slavery, African Americans were deemed inferior and encountered restrictions on their access to education. Due to the absence of formal schooling for slaves, they had limited opportunities to learn. They often relied on secretive informal education during their interactions with the children of their slave masters, preachers, and other Whites (Russell-Brown, 2022; Weissman, 2019). As African American culture emerged during this period, it was influenced by European Americans who instilled a notion of African Americans' intellectual inferiority (Beaubrun, 2020; Russell-Brown, 2022).

During the era of slavery, African Americans experienced severe punishments for attempting to acquire literacy skills (Beaubrun, 2020; Russell-Brown, 2022; Weissman, 2019). When free African Americans attempted to pursue education for themselves or their children, they encountered significant opposition and resistance. This backlash, rooted in fear and apprehension, contributed to the early emergence of the achievement gap experienced by African Americans (Beaubrun, 2020; Russell-Brown, 2022; Weissman, 2019).

The segregationist policies of the Jim Crow era further deepened disparities by maintaining separate and unequal schooling systems based on strict racial segregation (Matheny et al., 2023; Peer, 2024; Weissman, 2019). African American students attended schools that were underfunded, understaffed, and lacking essential resources (Black & Crolley, 2022; Peer, 2024). These segregated schools often had limited curricula, outdated textbooks, and inadequate facilities, creating significant obstacles to academic achievement (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.; Peer, 2024; Walsemann et al., 2022).

Under segregation, many schools for African Americans only provided education up to a specific grade level, limiting their access to higher education and advanced courses (Cook et al., 2021; Viano & Truong, 2022). In contrast, predominantly White schools had better resources, qualified teachers, and access to a broader range of educational opportunities (Black & Crolley, 2022). The allocation of resources and funding was highly unequal as state and local governments consistently allocated less support to African American schools than White ones (Black & Crolley, 2022;

Walsemann et al., 2022). Moreover, the curriculum in segregated African American schools often focused on vocational training and basic skills, providing limited opportunities for intellectual and academic development (Garry, 2021). Further, due to discriminatory hiring practices, underqualified and inexperienced teachers often taught African American students; lack of well-trained educators impeded the quality of education provided to African American students (Rattermann et al., 2021). Weissman (2019) found that White southerners and White northern philanthropists shared the perspective that African Americans should be given an inferior education to prepare them for subordinate positions within society and instill obedience.

The psychological effect of racial segregation on African American students cannot be overlooked. According to Eposito and Evans-Winters (2022), the denial of access to formal education and literacy under slavery was dehumanizing and likely had severe psychological consequences for enslaved African Americans. Later, segregated schools and daily racial discrimination created a hostile learning environment, leading to feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, and diminished academic aspirations for African American students (Cook et al., 2021). Additionally, attending segregated schools in which a large percentage of students live in poverty can negatively affect African American students' self-perception and self-worth (Benner et al., 2021). Researchers have found that perceived discrimination and stigma due to segregation are associated with increased stress, depression, and anxiety among African American adolescents (Assari, 2022; Hope et al., 2022).

During the 19th century, the concept of the achievement gap for African American students had yet to be developed. Woodson and Love (2019) noted that towards the end of the 19th century, the achievement gap did not exist. Despite challenging circumstances during the Jim Crow era, African American education flourished in the 1860s and 1870s (Perrotta & Rainey, 2022). African American children who gained access to education achieved comparable or superior performance compared to their White counterparts. However, their success was met with significant penalties and disadvantages (Woodson & Love, 2019).

In the 1890s, violence targeting African Americans, driven by White supremacist ideologies, had a detrimental effect on education (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Weissman, 2019; Woodson & Love, 2019). Acts of violence and intimidation were used as tools to suppress African American communities and limit their educational access. African American schools and educational institutions became targets of violence, with attacks aimed at undermining and destroying the progress made in African American education (Weissman, 2019; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). The violence and terror inflicted on African American communities in the 1890s often resulted in the closure and disruption of schools. African American students were forced to abandon their education due to safety concerns, and many schools were destroyed or forced to shut down (Perrotta & Rainey, 2022). These disruptions severely hindered educational opportunities for African American students and widened the achievement gap. By targeting African American education, White supremacists sought to limit African Americans' intellectual

and social advancement, thereby perpetuating their servitude, and reinforcing White supremacy (Weissman, 2019; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022).

The violence inflicted on African American communities had long-lasting psychological effects on individuals and the collective psyche. The fear and trauma resulting from these events had a detrimental effect on African American students' motivation, well-being, and ability to focus on their education, further widening the achievement gap (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Hanushek et al., 2019). According to Woodson and Love (2019), the term "achievement gap" was used to describe disparities in test scores between African American and White students by the late 1960s, as identified by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. These historical factors were the foundation for the persistent achievement gap.

### **Current Reasons for the African American Achievement Gap**

Socioeconomic factors, including poverty, limited access to quality healthcare, housing, and nutrition, significantly affect educational outcomes. Research has shown that poverty and economic inequality disproportionately affect African American students, hindering their academic progress and contributing to the achievement gap (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Gellar et al., 2023; Hanushek et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2020; Hussain, 2024; NASEM, 2019; Rambo-Hernandez, 2019; Walsemann et al., 2022). According to research by Hung et al. (2020), African American students experience significant disadvantages compared to their White peers primarily due to limited access to resources that could enhance their learning. Additionally, Hung et al. revealed that African American families tend to have lower average earnings when compared to White

households. As affirmed by Yeh (2019), these disparities in income and wealth are closely connected to differences in educational opportunities, contributing to variations in academic achievement. As Hung et al. emphasized, it is worth noting that the achievement gap is widening between students from low- and high-income backgrounds and along racial lines.

Socioeconomic status can influence the quality of early childhood education experiences (Compton-Lilly & Delbridge, 2019; Gay et al., 2021; Hussain, 2024; Matheny et al., 2023). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often encounter challenges to accessing educational resources (Ajiga et al., 2025; Hung et al., 2020; Matheny et al., 2023; Peer, 2024), while children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often have access to high-quality early childhood programs that provide a strong foundation for future learning (Gay et al., 2021; NASEM 2019; Sullivan et al., 2023). Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have inadequate school facilities, limited access to technology and educational materials, and fewer opportunities for enrichment activities such as tutoring or extracurricular programs (Cook et al., 2021; Matheny et al., 2023; NASEM, 2019; Peer, 2024). Research has also suggested that low-income minority students often encounter educational environments of lower quality, including less favorable school conditions and less qualified teachers, compared to their White peers (Matheny et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2021; Yeh, 2019). These findings were important as they highlighted the prevalence of low socioeconomic backgrounds among many African American students placing them at a disadvantage due to limited opportunities and resources.

Socioeconomic factors can affect the home environment and the level of student learning support. Hanushek et al. (2019) found that poverty significantly affected parental involvement in schools, particularly among families from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents facing economic challenges often have limited time and resources, making it more difficult to actively participate in their children's education. Lack of parental involvement can have a detrimental effect on academic achievement. Research has consistently shown that parents' engagement in their child's schooling positively influences their academic outcomes, motivation, and overall school success (Gay et al., 2021). Parental involvement fosters a supportive learning environment, enhances communication between home and school, and reinforces the value placed on education (Gay et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2021).

Yeh (2019) stated, children from low-income minority backgrounds tend to reside in households with a lower number of books compared to children raised in middle- and upper-income families. These children also tend to encounter fewer books in school and classroom libraries and reside at a greater distance from public libraries. The latter discrepancy can be attributed to the limited financial resources restricting the housing options available to African American families (Matheny et al., 2023).

Health issues and limited access to quality healthcare contribute significantly to the achievement gap affecting African American students (Gellar et al., 2023; Walsemann et al., 2022). African American students are more likely to experience health disparities, including higher rates of chronic illnesses, asthma, obesity, mental health challenges, inadequate nutrition, and limited access to healthcare (Compton-Lilly &

Delbridge, 2019; Gellar et al., 2023; Walsemann et al., 2022). These factors can directly affect their cognitive development and ability to concentrate and participate actively in school, along with their school attendance and overall academic performance, thereby contributing to the achievement gap (Allison et al., 2019). Inadequate access to quality healthcare exacerbates these disparities, as African American students may encounter challenges to receiving timely and appropriate medical care (Gellar et al. 2023; Krieger, 2021; Rattermann et al., 2021; Walsemann et al., 2022). Lack of preventive care, routine check-ups, and timely interventions further compounds health issues and negatively affects educational outcomes (Gellar et al., 2023; Rattermann et al., 2021; Walsemann et al., 2022). These findings were significant because they showed that limited access to quality healthcare and health issues among African American students could be contributors to the achievement gap. These disparities in healthcare access and health outcomes directly affect students' academic success (Gellar et al., 2023; Rattermann et al., 2021).

Negative classroom behavior and disciplinary practices significantly influence the African American achievement gap. Research has indicated that compared to their White peers engaging in similar behaviors, African American students are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions (Cook et al., 2021; Gopalan, 2019; Manigault & Davis; 2024; NASEM, 2019; Pearman et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2021; Weeks & Sullivan, 2024). This disparity is often attributed to implicit biases and cultural misunderstandings (Recknagel et al., 2022). Negative classroom behavior and harsh disciplinary measures can disrupt the learning environment.

According to Pearman et al. (2019) and the NASEM (2019), implementing exclusionary discipline practices harms academic achievement. These effects encompass various aspects, such as the loss of valuable instructional time, the development of negative academic self-perceptions, placement in lower-level courses, and an increased risk of dropping out of school (NASEM, 2019; Pearman et al., 2019).

Negative classroom behavior and disciplinary practices can contribute to a negative school climate and foster feelings of alienation and mistrust among African American students. Such experiences can affect their motivation, self-esteem, and overall academic performance, perpetuating the achievement gap (Cook et al., 2021). Researchers' findings have revealed that African American students experience disproportionate effects from strict disciplinary actions, leading to more frequent school absences and hindered learning progress (NASEM, 2023). According to Recknagel et al. (2022) and Wint et al. (2022), there is a possible disconnect between teachers and their comprehension of cultural behaviors displayed by African American students. Evidence has suggested that negative classroom behavior and disciplinary measures are factors recognized to contribute to the achievement gap experienced by African American students (Cook et al., 2021; NASEM, 2023). Researchers have shown that the challenges encountered by African American students, including disparities in socioeconomic status, limited access to quality healthcare, and negative disciplinary practices, collectively contribute to the persistent achievement gap. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating an equitable and supportive educational environment that fosters positive outcomes for all students.

### **Achievement Gap in Grades 1–3**

Academic achievement disparities between African American students and their White peers showed a persistent equity issue in early elementary grades (Quinn et al., 2020). Standardized assessments revealed sizable literacy and numeracy skills gaps for African American students as early as third grade compared to other demographic groups (Han et al., 2021). For example, an analysis of statewide data in Tennessee showed substantially lower reading and mathematics achievement for African American students compared to White students by Grade 3 across public schools (Han et al., 2021). Racial gaps were evident in teacher competency ratings as well, with educators evaluating African American students lower on literacy abilities even after accounting for fluctuations in behavior (Garcia et al., 2021).

While socioeconomic challenges and systemic inequities intensified gaps, differences in academic achievement between African American students and their White peers took place independently by early childhood (Quinn et al., 2020). This indicated that racial and ethnic identity itself influenced student outcomes prior to formal schooling, above and beyond socioeconomic factors. Consistent academic disparities remain complex, influenced by social processes like bias in teacher expectation and stereotypes in curriculum (Dotterer et al., 2022; Martinez & Broemmel, 2021). Regardless of sources, early achievement gaps often widen over students' trajectories, as skill gaps become reciprocal and compounding (Quinn et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023).

Closing achievement gaps requires multifaceted efforts designed to support young African American students' cultural experiences and developmental needs. Efficacious

interventions integrate identity-affirming pedagogy, teacher bias reduction, culturally responsive curriculum, and family/community engagement (Dotterer et al., 2022). If initiated in early childhood, intensive and sustained efforts to promote equitable education can substantially narrow ethnic academic disparities by third grade, sparing students long-term harms (Jenkins et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023).

### **African American Achievement Gap in Reading/Language Arts**

Throughout history, there has been a significant and persistent difference in academic performance between African American students and their peers in the subjects of reading and English language arts. On average, African American students tend to have lower reading skills compared to students of other racial backgrounds (Atteberry et al., 2021; Gay et al., 2021). According to a report by the NCES published in 2019, the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in reading and language arts remains a challenge in the U.S. education system. Research indicated that this gap still exists despite overall improvements in educational outcomes and poses a barrier to equitable education (NCES, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2023). Atteberry et al. (2021) asserted that African American children still have the lowest rates of early reading proficiency of any ethnic group in the United States. Washington et al. (2019) stated that the differences in language and reading abilities between African American boys and White boys are noticeable as early as toddler age for language arts and preschool age for reading. Washington et al. reported that when it comes to reading assessments, African American boys tend to perform worse than White boys. These researchers' findings

highlighted that African American students struggle with reading proficiency, and this struggle starts from a young age.

Early literacy and reading achievement for children from poor backgrounds can be hindered by various factors, as highlighted in existing research (Sullivan et al., 2023). According to Gay et al. (2021), disparities in literacy and language skills among these children can be traced back to the disparity between their home-based literacy experiences and those encountered in the school environment. Additionally, Compton-Lilly and Delbridge (2019), Gay et al. and Sullivan et al. (2023) emphasized that poverty substantially affects children's literacy development, affecting their overall performance in school. Factors such as inadequate access to proper nutrition, limited healthcare availability, residing in unsafe neighborhoods, and insufficient resources for supporting literacy learning contribute to the challenges poor children experience in their educational journey (Compton-Lilly & Delbridge, 2019; Gellar et al., 2023; Hanushek et al., 2019; Hung et al., 2020; Rambo-Hernandez, 2019; Viano & Truong, 2022). Researchers have noted that families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds engage in reading less frequently, possess fewer books, ask fewer questions to their children, and engage in fewer conversations compared to families with higher socioeconomic status (Capotosto, 2022; Gay et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Martinez & Fernandez; 2020). Johnson et al. (2021) indicated that families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds often encounter challenges in terms of active participation in their children's education. Research by Johnson et al. and Martinez and Fernandez (2020) emphasized the challenges that low-

income families encounter, such as time constraints and limited resources, which can affect their ability to engage effectively in their children's schooling.

Gay et al. (2021) and Bell et al. (2020) noted that while variations in teaching approaches and family involvement in literacy might exist throughout the academic year, a significant divergence emerges in the resources and assistance available to poor students during the summer break when school is not in session. According to the researchers' findings, poverty is a substantial factor in affecting both home and school literacy encounters, primarily due to its influence on the availability of essential resources to foster literacy development (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Hanushek et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2020; Rambo-Hernandez, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2023; Walsemann et al., 2022). According to Compton-Lilly and Delbridge (2019), Gay et al. and Sullivan et al. (2023), evidence has shown that poverty, particularly among African American students, contributes to lower reading achievement levels. Reardon et al. (2019) emphasized that the achievement gap in reading and language arts is not solely attributed to socioeconomic factors, but evidence suggests that disparities persist even when only economic differences are studied. These researchers' findings emphasize the need to address a wide range of factors, including curriculum, teaching methods, and cultural relevance in educational settings, to tackle this gap effectively.

Educators, researchers, and policymakers have been working to implement strategies aimed at closing this achievement gap (Chamber, 2009; Hawks, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023; Williams, 2021). These efforts have involved customized interventions, CRT practices, and increased parental and community involvement to create a more inclusive

and supportive learning environment for African American students (Reid et al., 2021; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2019; Ruck et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021).

Teachers can affect African American students' literacy growth positively. According to Compton and Delbridge (2019) and Boutte and Compton-Lilly (2022), teachers can substantially influence students' lives and literacy journeys, particularly when they enhance their understanding and responsiveness toward the difficulties that families may encounter. By gaining insights into the experiences of African American students and conducting outreach sessions within community settings rather than solely in schools, teachers can contribute significantly to promoting literacy development (Compton & Delbridge, 2019).

Lawson (2021) proposed that incorporating literature, stories, and materials that reflect African American students' cultural backgrounds and experiences helps students connect with the content and improves their engagement and comprehension. Robinson (2020) argued that a classroom library should include a wide range of books written by and about African Americans. Enabling African American students to engage with authentic books or graphic novels that resonate with their real-life experiences can empower them as active participants in their own learning journeys, expose students to different perspectives, and help build their reading skills while fostering a sense of belonging (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; Robinson, 2020). These researchers' viewpoints hold significance as they validate how teachers can contribute to advancing literacy skills among African American students, fostering their achievement in this domain.

### **African American Achievement Gap in Mathematics**

Conversations regarding disparities in education have brought attention to the mathematics achievement gap among African American students and their peers. According to Assari et al. (2021), the achievement gap between African American and White students has remained relatively consistent over the years. According to NCES (2019), the achievement gap between African American students and White students narrowed from 32 points in 1990 to 25 points in 2017. Davenport and Slate (2019) claimed that poverty has been linked to lower mathematics performance. Children of parents with lower levels of education often exhibit lower educational achievement compared to students whose parents have higher levels of education (Assari et al., 2021). Parents with advanced education tend to offer more socioeconomic resources that positively affect their children's academic performance. However, limited socioeconomic resources among African American parents can constrain their ability to invest in their children's education (Assari et al., 2021). Students in low-income areas often experience unequal access to essential resources, which can hinder their educational opportunities and outcomes (Ajiga et al., 2025; Black & Crolley, 2022; Cook et al., 2021; Hecht et al., 2023; NASEM, 2019; NCES, 2020; Scott et al., 2019; Walsemann et al., 2022). According to Morales-Chicas and Graham (2021), African American students are more often enrolled in basic mathematics classes compared to White students. Davenport and Slate also claimed that the rising levels of poverty among African American students coincide with a drop in mathematics performance, particularly among those who qualify for free lunch programs.

Teacher expectations significantly contribute to the academic achievement gap in mathematics among African American students. Malone et al. (2023) explained that when teachers have reduced expectations, they tend to assign tasks that do not involve critical thinking or solving problems. Malone et al. further suggested that biases and preconceived notions about students' abilities based on their race can lead to differential treatment and lower expectations for certain groups. This phenomenon can result in limited opportunities for African American students to access advanced and rigorous mathematics coursework, receive the necessary support, and have negative attitudes toward mathematics (Morgan et al., 2023; NASEM, 2019). Consequently, lowered expectations may negatively affect their self-esteem, confidence, and overall performance in mathematics-related subjects (Brown, 2021; Malone et al., 2023). Malone et al. emphasized the importance of parental expectations, noting that poor students frequently encounter limited expectations from teachers. The collective influence of these expectations and attitudes, stemming from teachers, parents, and students themselves, contributes to the mathematics achievement gap experienced by African American students.

The difference in mathematics achievement between African American students and their peers can be seen at every educational level. According to Morgan et al. (2023), the academic achievement gap is evident among African American students and their White peers as early as third grade. Morgan et al. argued that about 3%–4% of African American students, as opposed to 13%–16% of White students, displayed advanced science or mathematics achievement during their kindergarten year. Irizarry (2021)

emphasized that less than 20% of African American students were taking advanced and higher-level mathematics courses compared to 45% of White students, with the gaps widening through high school.

### **Teachers' Role in the Achievement Gap**

Teachers are crucial in contributing to or bridging the achievement gap among students. Their expectations, teaching methods, and interactions can either reinforce disparities or promote equity in education. According to Zeng (2023), teachers are the source of knowledge within the classroom and hold a pivotal position in fostering students' educational accomplishments. Zeng further argued that the variances in students' achievement levels are often connected to the characteristics of their teachers. Flint et al. (2019) explained that negative assumptions about students' skills, abilities, competencies, and motivation directly affect how teachers teach urban and African American students. Viewpoints centered on deficits can lead teachers to hold diminished expectations for historically marginalized students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Malone et al., 2023; Ramsay, 2020). How teachers view their students is significant in determining a variety of educational opportunities and decisions, including assignments to services like special education and gifted programs (Redding, 2019; Villodas et al., 2019).

A lack of cultural awareness about African American students can significantly contribute to the academic achievement gap. When teachers are unfamiliar with students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, they may unintentionally create an unwelcoming or disconnected environment (Malone et al., 2023). This can affect

students' engagement, motivation, and overall sense of belonging in the classroom.

Ramsay (2020) described that when cultural differences influence teachers' perspectives and actions, it can result in African American students being overlooked and opportunities to recognize their contributions being lost over time. Malone et al. (2023) also stated that an absence of CRT approaches could hinder students' ability to connect with the material and feel that their experiences are valued. As a result, these students might not receive the support and encouragement they need to succeed academically, exacerbating the existing achievement gap. In a study conducted by Flint et al. (2019), researchers found that White teachers from middle-class backgrounds initially believed that students of African American descent, who were from low-income urban areas, lacked the potential for achieving high academic success. Bazemore-Bertrand and Handsfield (2019) stated that even teachers who join the teaching field frequently feel unready to instruct in schools with limited resources and predominantly low-income student populations. This feeling arises from their perceived lack of understanding of diverse cultures (Madsen et al., 2019). According to the researchers' findings, cultural differences between teachers and students could lead to teachers developing unfavorable views of their students, especially when their cultural backgrounds differ. The lack of awareness among teachers about the cultural aspects of African American students has contributed to the academic achievement disparity.

### **Teachers' Perspectives of Culture and Academic Achievement**

Culture is a pivotal factor in education, determining the interactions and experiences within the classroom. It encompasses a wide range of values, beliefs,

customs, and traditions that influence how students perceive the world and how they learn and engage with academic content (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023). Teachers bring their own cultural perspectives into the teaching process, which can resonate with or differ from their students. This interplay of diverse cultural backgrounds can enhance learning, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and empathy (Brown, 2021; Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023). However, cultural differences can also pose challenges, potentially leading to misunderstandings, biases, and even hindered educational outcomes (Madsen et al., 2019; McAllister & Irvine, 2023; Moritz Rudasill et al., 2023; Ramsay, 2020). Acknowledging and respecting various cultures within the educational context is essential for creating an inclusive and effective learning space where all students can excel academically and personally.

The NAEYC (2022) emphasized the significant effect of culture on education. Children and families come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and these differences should be celebrated and integrated into the educational experience (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023). According to the NAEYC, a culturally responsive approach in education involves acknowledging and valuing the various languages, traditions, and perspectives that children bring to the classroom. This approach supports children's social and emotional development and enhances their cognitive growth. Teachers should create inclusive environments that promote respect for cultural diversity, foster positive relationships among children and families, and provide learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful across different cultural contexts (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; McAllister & Irvine, 2023). By embracing cultural diversity, teachers may effectively

support children's learning, honor their identities, and contribute to a more equal and inclusive educational system.

According to Ladson-Billings (1996), it is crucial for teachers to recognize and build upon the cultural strengths, experiences, and knowledge that students bring to the classroom. This enhances students' engagement and motivation and promotes their academic success. Ladson-Billings argued that the curriculum and instructional methods should be inclusive of diverse perspectives and experiences, reflecting the backgrounds of the students. Ladson-Billings highlighted the importance of fostering a positive cultural identity in students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. Teachers can create a more meaningful and empowering learning environment by integrating culturally relevant materials, teaching strategies, and perspectives (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; McAllister & Irvine, 2023; Tanese, 2020). The researchers' claims demonstrate how the role of culture in education guides classroom interactions and experiences, influencing how students perceive the world and engage with academic content.

### **Teachers' Classroom Practices to Close the Achievement Gap**

The examination of teachers' classroom and instructional practices emerges as a crucial focal point in closing the academic achievement gap. By customizing their instructional approaches to individual student needs, providing additional support where necessary, and fostering positive learning environments, teachers contribute significantly to reducing disparities in academic outcomes (Kirkpatrick et al., 2020; Pozas et al.,

2021). Recognizing and implementing effective instructional practices emerges as a pivotal step in promoting fair access to education and closing the achievement gap.

Recent research emphasized the efficacy of differentiated instruction and personalized learning as potent tools to address diverse learning needs (Am et al., 2023). Differentiated learning involves the practice of designing instructional methods to accommodate diverse student needs, adapting instruction to varying learning styles and abilities within a classroom (Pozas et al., 2021; Unal et al., 2022). Personalized learning takes customization a step further, and emphasizes individualized educational pathways based on students' specific interests, preferences, and pace of learning (Gunawardena et al., 2024; Hughey, 2020). Teachers who employ these practices design their instructional approaches to accommodate variations in students' abilities, preferences, and backgrounds, enhance student engagement and understanding by acknowledging and addressing the unique characteristics and requirements of each learner, and foster a more inclusive learning environment.

Culturally responsive pedagogy has gained prominence as a transformative approach to teaching that acknowledges and integrates students' diverse cultural backgrounds into the curriculum (Dyches et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024; Mburu, 2022). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an instructional approach that respects and integrates students' diverse cultural backgrounds into the learning experience. It involves incorporating materials, strategies, and classroom practices that reflect the cultural diversity of the students, creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment (Dyches et al., 2022). This method aims to enhance students' understanding and

engagement by recognizing and valuing their unique cultural perspectives. By incorporating culturally relevant content and instructional strategies, teachers create an inclusive atmosphere that enhances student engagement and comprehension.

Research emphasized the crucial role of teachers in fostering positive relationships with students and setting high expectations for their academic performance (Geven et al., 2021). Building strong teacher–student relationships is vital for creating a positive and effective learning environment (Göktaş & Kaya, 2023; NAEYC, n.d.-b). When teachers and students have positive connections, it creates a supportive atmosphere where students feel valued and motivated to learn (Wang, 2023). These relationships foster open communication, trust, and a sense of belonging, ultimately contributing to students’ academic success and well-being (Allen, 2021; Thornberg et al., 2022). Teachers who communicate a belief in their students’ capabilities and maintain supportive relationships contribute significantly to closing the achievement gap.

Using different ways of teaching, like personalized learning and modifying lessons to fit each students’ needs, along with building good relationships between teachers and students, and making sure lessons connect with diverse cultures are vital. These teaching practices help all students feel included and supported in their learning. By doing these things, teachers can make a big difference in closing the achievement gap and making sure every student has a fair chance to do well in school.

In addressing the achievement gap, teachers rely on various instructional resources to support student learning. Differentiated and personalized instruction allows teachers to adapt their teaching methods to meet individual students’ needs, helping to

bridge gaps in understanding and achievement (Am et al., 2023; Pozas et al., 2021). Additionally, fostering strong teacher–student relationships create a supportive environment where students feel valued and motivated to succeed, contributing to narrowing the gap (Göktaş & Kaya, 2023; NAEYC, n.d.-b). Moreover, integrating culturally relevant pedagogy acknowledges students’ diverse backgrounds and promotes inclusive learning experiences, which are essential in closing the achievement gap (Dyches et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024; Mburu, 2022). These instructional practices, when employed effectively, are pivotal in addressing disparities in academic outcomes among students.

### **Resources Used to Close the Achievement Gap**

In an effort to help all students succeed, teachers use various tools and strategies to close the achievement gap. Teachers have a crucial role in addressing these disparities by tapping into a range of instructional resources. From personalized learning materials to technology-based tools and ongoing training, these resources are essential in customizing education to meet the unique needs of each student (Major et al., 2021; Schmid et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). The instructional resources teachers utilize within the classroom create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, ultimately working towards narrowing the achievement gap.

Differentiated instructional materials serve as a fundamental resource for teachers striving to close the achievement gap by adapting their teaching to individual student needs. Pozas et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of these materials, which allow educators to provide varied content, activities, and assessments that accommodate diverse

learning styles and abilities within the classroom. By adjusting the complexity and format of instructional materials, teachers can better address the specific requirements of each student, thereby reducing disparities in academic performance (Am et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2023). Teachers utilize diverse learning materials, such as textbooks, workbooks, and online resources, that cater to different learning styles and abilities within their classrooms. These materials can be adapted to meet the specific needs of individual students, helping to bridge gaps in understanding (Unal et al., 2022). This approach creates a more inclusive learning environment, fostering engagement and understanding among students with varying backgrounds and abilities, ultimately contributing to the ongoing effort to close the achievement gap.

An additional resource teachers use to close the achievement gap are technology-based tools. Teachers harness technology as a powerful tool to provide personalized and equitable learning experiences. According to Divanji et al. (2023), technology-based resources offer opportunities for adaptive learning, enabling teachers to adapt instruction to individual student needs. Digital platforms, educational apps, and online resources allow for differentiated content delivery, interactive assessments, and specific interventions, supporting students with diverse learning styles and abilities (Lauricella & Jacobson, 2022; Minttu & Rune, 2022). By integrating technology into the classroom, teachers can bridge gaps in understanding, enhance engagement, and contribute to closing the achievement gap among students of varying backgrounds.

Teachers employ collaborative learning structures as a strategic approach to closing the achievement gap, fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

According to Yang (2023), collaborative learning engages students in group activities, such as projects or peer tutoring, allowing them to work together and learn from one another. This approach not only promotes social interaction but also enhances understanding and knowledge retention. Yang emphasized that collaborative learning can be an effective strategy to bridge gaps in academic achievement, particularly among students with diverse backgrounds, by providing opportunities for peer support and shared learning experiences. Implementing collaborative learning practices is thus instrumental in creating a cooperative and enriching learning environment that contributes to efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap.

Teachers leverage Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) as a powerful strategy to address and close the achievement gap by acknowledging and embracing the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. As emphasized by Ladson-Billings (2019), CRT involves incorporating culturally relevant content, perspectives, and instructional approaches into the curriculum. By doing so, teachers create a learning environment that is more inclusive and responsive to the cultural identities of their students, ultimately enhancing engagement and academic achievement (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). This approach has been recognized as essential for narrowing the achievement gap, as it fosters a sense of cultural validation, relevance, and connection, which positively impacts academic outcomes (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2019). Integrating CRT into teaching practices is thus a crucial step toward creating more equitable educational experiences for students from various backgrounds.

Teachers employ assessment tools strategically to play a significant role in closing the achievement gap by monitoring student progress and adapting instruction accordingly. According to recent research by Ismail et al. (2022), formative and summative assessment tools are essential for identifying areas of improvement and understanding individual student needs. By regularly assessing student performance, teachers can implement specific interventions, provide additional support where necessary, and ensure that instructional strategies are responsive to diverse learning requirements (Varier & Yun, 2023). These assessment practices contribute to a fair learning environment, facilitating the reduction of disparities in academic achievement among students of varying backgrounds and abilities.

### **Race and Academic Achievement**

Race is a significant and complex factor in education, affecting students' experiences and classroom dynamics (Jones et al., 2021). Historical and societal inequalities have led to persistent educational opportunities and outcome disparities among different racial groups (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Hanushek et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021; NCES, 2022). These disparities can be seen in areas such as academic achievement, access to advanced coursework, disciplinary practices, and graduation rates (Cook et al., 2021; Gopalan, 2019; Madsen et al., 2019; NASEM, 2019; Pearman et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2021). Race influences students' perceptions of themselves, interactions with peers and teachers, and overall sense of belonging within the educational environment (Jones et al., 2021). Teachers' implicit biases and cultural misunderstandings can inadvertently perpetuate these disparities, affecting students' self-

esteem and academic motivation (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; Moritz Rudasill et al., 2023). Addressing the role of race in education requires fostering inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms, providing equitable resources and opportunities, and promoting a curriculum that reflects the diversity of students' experiences (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023). Based on the assertions of the researchers, acknowledging, and actively addressing the effects of race, education systems can work towards dismantling inequities and creating a more just and inclusive learning environment for all students.

The NAEYC (2022) emphasized the importance of addressing issues of race and equity in early childhood education. Allen et al. (2021) acknowledged that race and equity are significant in developing children's experiences within educational settings. NAEYC encouraged educators to be aware of and actively work to counteract biases and systemic inequities that may affect children of different racial backgrounds. NAEYC advocated for creating inclusive and anti-bias learning environments that celebrate diversity, promote positive racial identities, and challenge stereotypes and discrimination. This involves selecting materials, books, and activities reflecting the racial and cultural diversity of the children and families served. Additionally, NAEYC emphasizes the importance of building culturally responsive relationships and engaging in ongoing professional development to understand better the effect of race and racism on children's development and learning.

### **Teachers' Perspective on African American Achievement**

From a teacher's perspective, the African American achievement gap is a deeply concerning issue that demands attention and action. It represents a persistent disparity in

educational outcomes that reflects broader societal inequalities. Teachers often recognize the multifaceted nature of this gap, acknowledging that it is not solely rooted in individual effort or ability, but rather influenced by complex factors such as systemic racism, unequal access to resources, and cultural biases (Hecht et al., 2023; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Tanese, 2020). McAllister and Irvine (2023) claimed that teachers are responsible for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments where all students can succeed regardless of their background. The researchers' perspective emphasized the importance of addressing systemic inequities, fostering cultural awareness, and implementing strategies that empower African American students to succeed academically and beyond (Gardner-Neblett, 2023; McAllister and Irvine, 2023).

Tanese (2020) affirmed that teachers believe the reasons behind the academic achievement gap among African American students are multifaceted and involves a combination of systemic, social, and educational factors. Teachers often recognize that historical inequities, unequal access to resources, and socioeconomic disparities substantially affect this gap (Hecht et al., 2023; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Jones et al., 2021). Teachers also acknowledge the influence of implicit biases, limited representation of diverse cultures in the curriculum, and unequal disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect African American students (Cook et al., 2021; Madsen et al., 2019; Pearman et al. (2019). McAllister and Irvine (2023) explained that teachers emphasize the importance of cultural competence in their approach, aiming to bridge the gap by understanding and addressing the diverse needs of their students. While teachers work to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment, they also advocate for

policy changes, improved resources, and equitable opportunities to help close the achievement gap and ensure that African American students have an equal chance to succeed academically (Chamber, 2009; Hawks, 2020; Williams, 2021). The researchers' assertions emphasized that teachers express deep concern about the African American achievement gap, acknowledging its complex nature and understanding that systemic factors like racism, unequal resource access, and cultural biases contribute to this disparity, reflecting broader societal inequalities.

### **How Student-Teacher Relationships Influence Student Academic Achievement**

Teachers' cultural competence is an important factor in fostering academic achievement among students. Teachers who deeply understand diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives are better able to develop inclusive and engaging learning environments for students (McAllister & Irvine, 2023). According to the NAEYC (2022), culturally competent teachers acknowledge and value each student's unique experiences and strengths in the classroom, which helps establish a sense of belonging and trust. Teachers can integrate culturally relevant materials, teaching methods, and examples into their instruction to make academic content more relatable and meaningful for students from various backgrounds (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; McAllister & Irvine, 2023; Tanese, 2020). Hernandez and Burrows (2021) stated that culturally competent educators are attuned to potential biases and stereotypes that may affect academic achievement, working diligently to mitigate these challenges and ensure academic achievement for all.

In a study conducted by McAllister and Irvine (2023), researchers found that a teacher's cultural competence significantly influences academic achievement by creating

an inclusive and supportive classroom community that enhances students' learning experiences. According to Facun-Granadozo et al. (2023), when teachers possess a deep understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds, they are better able to relate to their students, appreciate their individual strengths, and effectively design instruction to meet their diverse needs. Culturally competent teachers can bridge the gap between students' cultural identities and the curriculum, making learning more relevant and engaging (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). Facun-Granadozo et al. argued that this approach not only increases students' academic motivation but also bolsters their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. Furthermore, culturally competent teachers are attuned to potential cultural biases and misunderstandings that can hinder learning and actively work to mitigate these challenges (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021; McAllister & Irvine, 2023). By fostering an environment of respect, empathy, and cultural awareness, teachers with cultural competence contribute to improved academic outcomes, a sense of belonging, and overall educational success for their students (McAllister & Irvine, 2023).

While a teacher's cultural competence is a crucial factor in developing the academic achievement of both African American and White students, its effect can differ significantly due to varying cultural backgrounds and experiences. For African American students, culturally competent teachers should understand and address their historical and systemic challenges, such as stereotypes, limited access to resources, and disparities in opportunities (Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Tanese, 2020). McAllister and Irvine (2023) argued that by recognizing and valuing African American students' cultural strengths and perspectives, teachers can create an environment where they feel acknowledged and

empowered, ultimately contributing to their improved academic performance. Similarly, for White students, cultural competence involves an awareness of their own cultural perspectives and biases, fostering a classroom environment that promotes respect and understanding of diversity (Robey & Dickter, 2022). While the strategies employed may differ, the overarching goal remains the same: to create a supportive and equitable learning space where all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, can excel academically and personally (NAEYC, 2019; Scott et al., 2019). The claims of the researchers emphasize that a teacher's cultural competence significantly influences academic achievement by fostering an inclusive and supportive classroom environment, bridging the gap between students' cultural identities and the curriculum.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant literature related to the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. The written material discussed various aspects of the African American achievement gap. The literature review results provided information on the historical and current reasons for the African American achievement gap. The historical review shows how the gap started with African American students and continues to exist. As it relates to the African American achievement gap, literature demonstrated a connection between socioeconomic factors, including poverty, limited access to quality healthcare, housing, and nutrition, and the African American achievement gap. In the literature review, multiple studies concluded that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often experience challenges to access educational resources, such as inadequate school facilities, limited access to

technology and educational materials, and fewer opportunities for enrichment activities such as tutoring or extracurricular programs. A review of the literature demonstrated that the African American achievement gap seen in early childhood continues to exist in advanced and higher-level education courses. During the investigation of the African American achievement gap, the academic performance of African American students remains a significant source of concern for communities, educational institutions, and policymakers. Several intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to this challenge, including teacher perspectives, lack of knowledge regarding developmental and cultural competencies, and race in education. Gaining insights into teachers' viewpoints on the academic achievement gap and their experiences closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers.

This review of existing literature suggests a scarcity of qualitative research on teachers' experiences closing the achievement gap (Cabral-Gouveia, 2023; Sullivan et al., 2023). There remains a gap in practice that needs to be investigated from the perspective of teachers who teach African American students. With the intention of revealing new knowledge, this study is designed to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. Chapter 2 included an overview of the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and review of the current literature. Chapter 3 includes a full description of the research design, the role of the researcher, methodology, data collection, and data analysis plan for investigating teachers' experiences closing the

achievement gap between African American students and their White peers and what they need to help close the achievement gap.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers may help other educators close the achievement gap in their schools by using the study findings in their school setting. Chapter 3 elaborates on the research methodology used in this study. I detail aspects such as the research design, the rationale, and the researcher's role. Additionally, the methodology concerns regarding the credibility of findings, and ethical protocols for the study are discussed.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This basic qualitative study addressed the following primary research question:

RQ: What are early childhood teachers' experiences closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3?

In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' experiences closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. A qualitative approach for this study was appropriate because it allowed rich data to be gathered in the form of a narrative about teachers' personal experiences (see Burkholder et al., 2019). Rubin and Rubin (2012) further argued that in-depth interviews enable researchers to collect comprehensive and detailed data in the form of personal

experiences, narratives, or anecdotes. I conducted one-on-one interviews using Zoom to explore teachers' experiences, perspectives, and opinions.

Considering the scope of this study, I considered using other research designs prior to selecting basic qualitative research. I opted against employing a quantitative approach, as outlined by Noyes et al. (2019), who explained that quantitative studies clarify phenomena by gathering numerical data and subjecting them to analysis through mathematical methods. I chose a qualitative design rather than a quantitative design because my goal was to gather more in-depth, descriptive data on personal experiences and real-world perspectives rather than quantifying data or identifying statistical relationships between variables. I considered doing a case study, where a researcher tries to describe how a subject, situation, or individual interacts within a real-world context (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While conducting a case study would include insight into specific instances, a semistructured interview allows for a more in-depth inquiry into the participants' lived experiences. Moreover, some of the challenges associated with case studies that I identified are the potential for researcher bias and limited generalizability (see Delios et al., 2022). I decided that utilizing a basic qualitative design was more appropriate for this study because it allows me the flexibility to explore a more complex phenomenon such as the African American achievement gap, investigate the richness of human experiences, and record a diverse range of perspectives (see Tenny et al., 2022).

I contemplated using a phenomenological research design for my study. With phenomenological research, researchers can closely look at participants' actual life events and what happens in real situations. Phenomenological research allows investigators to

deeply explore real-life experiences. However, this data collection method would not support my intent to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3 and what they need to help close the achievement gap. Phenomenological research is used to grasp the core of an experience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022), rather than exploring views on how to specifically address practical real-world issues such as the specific challenges associated with the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3, which was the focus of this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as a researcher was to gather, organize, and analyze data to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. As the sole researcher, I was responsible for all aspects of the study. As the researcher, I led this study and gathered information from participants through Zoom. I used an interview protocol to collect data. Once interviews were completed, the data were coded and analyzed in order to answer the research question. During the interviews, I created a comfortable environment to promote communication by asking open-ended questions and allowing participants to share additional thoughts at the end of the interview. I also actively listened, asked for clarification, and ensured a smooth interview process.

I began my career in education as a home-based childcare provider. After closing my home-based childcare center, I worked as an instructional support paraprofessional

for 2 years. After receiving my master's degree in management and leadership, passing the Elementary Education GACE assessment, and becoming certified as an early childhood teacher in the state of Georgia, I served as a 4th-grade elementary school teacher. After teaching fourth grade for 6 years, I began working as an Early Intervention Program (EIP) teacher, supporting Tier 2 and Tier 3 students needing additional support in mathematics. During my years as an educator, I have served as a grade level chair, trained mathematics and reading coach, teacher leader, assessment leader cohort member, mathematics lesson plan coordinator, and district student engagement panelist. My experiences working in low-income Title I schools have promoted my interest in developing this study.

I was aware that my time as an early childhood teacher may have led to some biases. In qualitative research, researchers have a big role, and they need to openly talk about any biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences they bring into the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2020). As an African American and as a teacher, I have firsthand experiences with the achievement gap between African American and White students, racism, stereotypes, and implicit/explicit bias affecting all students. These biases can affect the research, so it was important to practice reflexivity, which means carefully thinking about the researcher's own identity, position, and personal views to lessen the effect of biases (see Ravitch & Carl, 2020). To address my personal biases, I used reflexivity by recording my thoughts and biases as I went through each process of the study data collection and analysis. The current study was based on a sensitive topic; some teachers may not have wanted to share their perspectives. I overcame this challenge by

building trust and rapport with the participants to create an atmosphere of trust and safety. Participants were more likely to openly communicate if they felt comfortable and believed that their privacy would be protected. I also asked open-ended questions instead of asking closed-ended questions to allow participants to express their thoughts and feelings more freely. I also let teachers know that their input was important to my research.

I did not have any professional or personal relationships that might potentially influence teacher participants in this study. As a teacher leader within my school, I also wanted to prevent potential conflict of interest or supervisor differentials. To ensure this, I did not utilize participants who work in the same environment as me. No incentives were provided to participants in the study.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

I used purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. According to Campbell et al. (2020), purposeful sampling is used to select participants who are most likely to give useful information and are knowledgeable of the phenomenon. The participants for this study included 13 early childhood teachers in Grades 1–3. Using small sample sizes in qualitative research helps to generate thorough responses and answer the research question. Tenny et al. (2022) stated that qualitative research focuses on exploring and providing deeper insight into real-world issues by gathering participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior. I used snowball sampling to obtain more qualified participants. Applying snowball sampling enabled me to ask study

participants to refer others who may offer additional or corroborating perspectives on the topic (see Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

The criteria for participant selection for this study were that participants (a) teach first to third grade, (b) have experience teaching African American students as well as students of other races, (c) are certified to teach in their respective states, and (d) have more than 1 year teaching experience. Recruiting approximately 10–15 participants who met the criteria for participation would ensure depth of inquiry of the phenomenon. After obtaining approval (Approval No. 04-29-24-1069578) from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I posted an invitation on the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood social media teacher groups to recruit participants. To ensure verification of selection criteria, I screened all potential participants by reviewing the prescreening checklist created in Microsoft Word, so I could contact participants who met the selection criteria. I verified they met the criteria before selecting participants by emailing them after they emailed me using their school email about the study invitation. Participants who volunteered, emailed me using a school email address, and met the criteria of the research study were e-mailed a consent form. All willing participants sent a return e-mail message to me stating “I consent” to participate, plus the attached signed informed consent form and instructed to keep a copy for themselves. I continued to solicit participants until I reached a sufficient number of participants.

### **Instrumentation**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument and is responsible for data collection (Suadik, 2022). I created an interview protocol (see

Appendix A) to collect interview data. I used this interview protocol during my interviews to gather demographic information, review informed consent, and ask the interview questions to teacher participants.

I conducted semistructured interviews with each teacher participant. I designed the interview protocol with 10 open-ended interview questions for this instrument based on my research question, conceptual framework, and related literature. Coll and Lamberty's model and literature from Hanushek et al. (2019), the NAEYC (n.d.), and Lawson (2021), were used to create the interview questions. The interview questions were arranged from simple to complex and there were probing or follow-up questions to use if necessary. I also wrote follow-up and probing questions to gain further insight into teachers' experiences. Taherdoost (2022) explained that the process of designing primary and follow-up interview questions includes considering research question(s). Interview questions that give participants the opportunity to express their points of view with privacy and without limitation are the goal of qualitative research (Taherdoost, 2022).

The goal of the basic qualitative approach was to understand and explore real-life everyday situations and experiences to learn more about them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Ravitch and Carl (2015), this approach allows researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of participant's thoughts, feelings, and actions. By using open-ended questions and flexible methods, researchers capture the richness and details of what people go through. This basic approach helps in discovering unique stories and perspectives that can provide valuable insights into various aspects of life. I used my open-ended interview protocol as my data collection instrument (see Appendix A). My

goal was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American student and their White peers, which was by conducting in-depth interviews with teacher participants, as opposed to observations or document review. An in-depth interview protocol was sufficient to answer the research question.

According to Pattinson et al. (2023), content validity is how well an instrument truly reflects the constructs in depth. Content validity for this instrument was established sharing the questions with a research professor at a local state university. The professor provided feedback and the suggested changes for improved clarity were used to edit the interview questions. The interview questions were deemed sufficient to answer the research question for the study.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The study sample consisted of 13 teacher participants. The criteria for participant selection for this study were that participants (a) teach first to third grade, (b) have experience teaching African American students as well as other students, (c) are certified to teach in their respective states, and (d) have more than 1 year teaching experience.

#### ***Recruitment***

Participants were recruited after permission was received from Walden's IRB. I recruited participants by posting an invitation in the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teacher social media groups. The invitation included details about the study purpose, participant criteria, and contact information for potential volunteers to respond with their interest. Participants expressed their willingness to take part in the

study by sending an email to me through my Walden email or by calling or texting my cell phone number found on the Consent Form. I then emailed those who met the criteria a copy of the consent form. If it was not returned after 10 days, I emailed a reminder. No interviews took place until I received each participant's consent to proceed. If I did not receive participants' consent 10 days after the second email, I followed up through email one additional time. Following my attempts, if I still did not receive their consent, it was assumed they were not interested in participating in the study and no further contact was made with potential participants. After participants responded in the affirmative, I made contact via email with all teachers who agreed to participate. The email contained a thank-you letter and a list of interview appointment options for them to select the most convenient date and time slot. I also offered participants the option to select their own day and time to participate in the interview if the day and times provided did not work or fit their schedule. Since the initial recruitment efforts did not yield enough participants, snowball sampling was used as an additional strategy to obtain more participants.

### ***Participation***

I emailed the consent form to give them the opportunity to review the details of the study. The informed consent form also included a disclaimer that the interview sessions would be audio recorded and how interview responses would be used. The interviews took 45 to 60 minutes. Teachers were asked to respond with "I consent" via email to participate in the study. I sent all teachers who agreed to participate a thank you email and a list of interview appointment options for them to select the most convenient date and time slot. I conducted the interviews as scheduled using specific interview

questions from the interview protocol guide. The participants also received a two-page summary of the study findings after the data were analyzed for their review. This process took 20 minutes and the participants responded with any comments or questions within 10 business days.

### ***Data Collection***

Scheduled interviews took place via Zoom conferencing and lasted 45–60 minutes. All interviews were held via Zoom. I provided a link to access the online meeting in an email. Before each interview, I reminded participants that their privacy is important, and their identity would remain confidential. I also reminded participants that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time and all information would be destroyed for participants who decided to not participate in the study. Participants could request questions to be repeated, and they were permitted to refuse to answer or skip a question. I explained that the interview would be audio recorded with their permission, using Zoom for later review and transcription purposes. Responses were audio recorded only via Zoom.

Interviews were conducted one on one, using semi structured interview questions. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to collect interview data. I asked interview questions in the same order for each participant to ensure consistency. I asked one question at a time and repeated questions if needed. Interview and follow-up questions were asked to probe participants and gain clarity. According to Taherdoost (2022), follow-up or probing questions are used to gather more details.

I concluded the interviews by allowing participants to ask questions and thanked them again for participating in the research study by reading the post interview script. This included reminding participants that they will participate in member checking during data analysis. Participants were sent a two-page summary of the findings to comment on, provide feedback, and ask questions, if they had any, via email. They were asked to respond to this request within 10 business days of receiving the summary.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis plan in qualitative research is similar to a roadmap. It helps researchers to make sense of the information gathered from interviews, observations, and conversations (Burkholder et al., 2019). Data analysis consists of arranging and preparing data, reading, and thinking about the main ideas, analyzing the data using a specific method, creating a description of the people, finding important themes, patterns, and ideas in the data, representing the data, and understanding the larger meaning of the data (Lester et al., 2020). Burkholder et al. (2020) stated that researchers can transcribe interviews with the use of software, hiring someone, or transcribing the data on their own. To transcribe my interviews, I used Transcribe (<https://transcribe.com>), an online program used to transcribe human text into speech. I used an alphanumeric code for each participant to protect anonymity. I used the teacher, grade, and interview number. For example, T11 was teacher, 1st grade, 1st interview; T12 was teacher, 1st grade, 2nd interview. T2 was teacher 2nd grade; T3 was teacher 3rd grade, then I inserted the order of teachers interviewed for each grade level. I checked each transcription with the original recording to ensure accuracy. I stored audio recordings, transcripts, participant

information, and physical data on my personal password-protected computer in my secure home office.

Braun and Clarke (2006) described a six-phase process used to assist researchers with analyzing data. The six phases are (a) familiarize yourself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) identify themes, (d) examine themes, (e) define and name themes, and (f) create the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During Phase 1, I thoroughly conducted a line-by-line analysis to become familiar with the data. I carefully read interview transcriptions, while making notes of initial ideas and annotating the transcripts. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), reading data as data and not just words allow the researchers to read words actively, analytically, and critically to determine what the data means. I also reviewed my reflective journal notes, which I used to reflect and document any bias and ideas about the data. The journal also helped me to reflect on what is included in the data.

Phase 2 began the coding process and a systematic analysis of the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Phase 2 begins when the researcher is fully familiarized and immersed in the data and has generated an idea about what is in the data. To review and make sense of my collected interview data, I engaged in a thorough and in-depth exploration of the data. Braun and Clarke asserted that Phase 2 sets the foundation for subsequent stages of analysis, helping researchers develop a comprehensive understanding of the data before moving on to the refinement and organization of codes into themes during the later phases of data analysis. Open coding was used to organize the unstructured interview responses by searching and identifying repeated words,

phrases, or concepts within and across all transcripts. The open coding process enabled me to break down lengthy, complex interview transcripts into more discrete, manageable pieces of data. Operational definitions of codes will be created to standardize and identify a clear description of the data.

I then used axial coding to help me to examine the coded data in a two-step process. I examined the open codes to identify patterns and connections in the data related to my research aims and form the open codes into categories. Through axial coding, I created and then combined or collapsed several categories into one if needed. I also subdivided categories into several, or created new categories, if needed. I used various colored highlighters to indicate separate categories. I refined the categories to identify emerging themes and developed a working thematic map to further analysis. I explained the interconnectedness in developing each category. Existing temporary categories were confirmed or modified based on patterns and connections. Operational definitions of codes were created to standardize and identify a clear description of the data.

In Phase 3, I analyzed the categorized data by interpreting the data for meaningfulness across the dataset (see Byrne, 2021). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Phase 3 is when researchers begin to think about the relationship between themes and codes. During this phase, I built upon the open codes and axial codes or categories generated in Phase 2. I combined or collapsed categories to identify emerging themes or patterns that captured the key aspects of the data and related them to the conceptual framework. This involved closely examining the dataset, identifying, and labeling

specific concepts or themes that emerged from the raw data. Phase 3 is crucial for moving from individual codes to a more abstract and overarching understanding of the data through the emergence of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, I sought to answer the research question.

Phase 4 began the reviewing and refinement phase. During Phase 4, I reviewed the data to determine if the temporary themes meaningfully captured the relevant data. In this phase researchers refine the boundaries of themes, consider their interrelationships, and articulate the essence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I created clear definitions for each theme and established a comprehensive understanding of the patterns within the data. Braun and Clarke (2012) defined six key questions to help researchers when reviewing and refining themes, (a) is this a theme? (b) what is the quality of this theme? (c) what are the boundaries of this theme? (d) are there enough meaningful data to support the theme? and (e) are the data too diverse and wide ranging? I used those key questions to engage in self-reflection to ensure that themes had been accurately identified, meaningfully supported the data, and answered the research question. If needed, I revisited the entire dataset to confirm the coherence of the identified themes across the entirety of the data. Themes lacking adequate supporting data were excluded, and were redefined if feasible.

In Phase 5, defining and labeling the themes took place. After defining and labeling the themes, I reviewed them to make interconnections between them and in accordance with the codes and dataset. Phase 6 is the last phase and culminates with a

production of the final analysis and written report. I reviewed the themes to confirm they answered the research question.

Discrepant cases were documented and discussed in the results. Discrepant cases refer to instances or examples within a study that deviate or significantly differ from previously identified patterns, themes, or trends in the overall data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discrepant cases represent unique situations that contrast with the common findings and can offer valuable insights into the complexity and diversity within the study. If discrepant cases arose, I identified and discussed those findings in detail to let the reader determine the value of the discrepant cases. I also included quotes of participants' responses from the interviews in the results and conclusions.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, it is important for researchers to ensure that their work is reliable and can be trusted (Stahl & King, 2020). This is done by focusing on credibility and trustworthiness, which means the findings are believable and make sense. Transferability is also important and consists of how well the researcher's findings can apply to different situations (Burkholder et al., 2019). Another important factor is dependability, which means the research methods are consistent and can be replicated (Burkholder et al., 2019). Researchers also consider confirmability, which includes being open and clear about how conclusions are reached (Stahl & King, 2020). These important factors help researchers to ensure their research is solid and dependable.

Credibility is described as the believability and trustworthiness of the study's findings (Johnson et al., 2020). It involves establishing the reliability and validity of the

research design and methods. To ensure credibility of this study, I used member checks as a form of validity. Member checking involves the verification of study findings by presenting them to participants. This approach fosters participant engagement and allows them to confirm, modify, or dispute the researcher's interpretations, enhancing the validity and credibility of the study's outcomes (Erdmann et al., 2023). Member checks are used to alleviate the risk of misinterpreting participants' expressions, actions, and perspectives regarding events (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I provided participants with a two-page summary of the study findings that enabled them to assess the credibility and accuracy of my analysis. Participants were able to report any concerns and questions about inaccuracies in the two-page study findings after data analysis was completed; this was emailed to each participant. I documented comments and concerns shared by the participants. In addition, I kept a journal throughout the study to record my own thoughts and biases. The goal was to produce credible findings that accurately represented the perspectives shared by participants.

Transferability in research refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied or generalized to other contexts or populations and is an important criterion for assessing the external validity of research (Stahl & King, 2020). To address the issue of transferability, I provided thick descriptions of the context and data. Ravitch and Carl (2016) defined thick description as a strategy that enables transferability and includes a detailed portrayal of the study's setting and participants. Relevant but non-identifiable characteristics of participants will be included. I described participants' demographic information, such as education, length of career, and duration of time working with

African American students. This comprehensive description will allow readers to assess the similarities and differences between their situation and faculty and the study participants. Readers can then determine if the findings may be relevant for other studies examining similar topics or populations. The goal is to provide sufficient detail to enable readers to judge the transferability of the results.

Dependability is defined as the consistency and stability of study results over time and across different conditions. Dependability emphasizes the reliability of the research process, ensuring that the findings are not subject to inconsistencies and can be trusted as a stable representation of the phenomena under investigation (Stahl & King, 2020). To strengthen dependability, I utilized an audit trail. An audit trail is a systematic and detailed documentation of the research process, decisions, and actions, and includes raw data, memos, and notes that provide a transparent record of the steps followed during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I ensured dependability by keeping notes on the decisions that have been made during the research process, sampling, data analysis, reflective thoughts, and how the data were managed. I thoroughly explained the research methodology and data collection procedures used. Describing the study design and process in detail allows others to understand and evaluate the approaches taken. I documented the research process, noting any changes or adjustments that occurred. Taking these steps to record and verify information carefully helps to substantiate that high-quality data were gathered to address the research question. Maintaining organized records and consistency in procedures will allow others to see how the study was conducted and assess the soundness of the results.

Confirmability is described as the degree to which the findings of a study are impartial and not influenced by the researcher's biases or preconceived notions. This aspect of research rigor is used for establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Kyngäs et al., 2020). To avoid personal biases influencing the study's results, I set aside any preexisting beliefs about racism, stereotypes, and implicit/explicit bias affecting African American students. Data came directly from participant interviews, not my own assumptions. I used recordings and transcripts of the interviews when analyzing information. Additionally, I utilized reflexivity by keeping a journal throughout the study to record any biases or assumptions that came to mind throughout the study. Documenting these reflections helped me maintain awareness of my perspective so it did not unduly influence the research findings. By directly gathering and validating data from participants, I ensured the conclusions were based on their experiences rather than my own ideas.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethical considerations are vital in qualitative research to prevent harm and protect participant privacy (Ellis, 2021). Before data collection, I obtained approval from the Walden University IRB to ensure that only ethical procedures were used. The IRB reviews research plans to address any ethical issues related to recruiting and protecting the rights and well-being of participants (Wexler & Largent, 2023). For example, the IRB would examine the study's proposed recruitment materials and processes. Universities have established IRBs to oversee all research under their authority and ensure it meets

ethical standards (Newman et al., 2021; Wexler & Largent, 2023). Acquiring IRB approval was important to ensure this study was conducted ethically.

Once approved, an invitation was posted and interested participants who responded to the invitation and who volunteered to participate in the study from Walden University's Participant Pool and early childhood teacher social media group posts by email or phone, who met the study criteria, were sent a consent form. Potential participants from the snowball sampling process also received an invitation and consent form to identify if they met the study criteria and chose to participate. The consent form contained the study, selection process, data uses, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, and lack of compensation. The form had a note that interviews were audio recorded, and data are confidential. Participants were required to review and return the consent via email prior to interviews, and I discussed consent again before starting. To maintain confidentiality, I used alphanumeric codes such as T11 and T12, during the data collection and the reporting process rather than names for participants and schools (see Newman et al., 2021). I kept all data from the semi structured interviews stored in my home office on my personal password protected computer. After 5 years beyond completion of my study, electronic data will be erased, and papers shredded by university policy. These steps are used to conduct an ethical study respecting participant confidentiality (see Ellis, 2021).

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the method I used in the research study and my reasoning for selecting a basic qualitative research design. I explained the role of the

researcher as well as how participants were identified and selected. The chapter included why and how data were collected and analyzed. The chapter also included the type of data and methods for collecting, storing, and analyzing data. This chapter included an explanation of the study trustworthiness and reliability. I outlined steps to protect the participants and their data ethically. In Chapter 4, I will provide the results, including data collection, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American and White students in Grades 1–3. In Chapter 4, I describe where the study took place, how I gathered and analyzed the data, and the study findings. I discuss study findings and include quotes from participants to support my conclusions. Lastly, I provide evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The research question was used to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. The findings of this study may be used by teacher preparation programs, school leaders, teachers, and policymakers to create policies and practices that support culturally relevant instruction to improve academic success for African American students and close the achievement gap.

In Chapter 4, I also discuss the setting and provide details on participant demographics. I describe how the data were collected and analyzed. In this chapter, I explain how data were organized and labeled using an open coding process, then refined with axial categorization and thematic analysis to uncover meaningful patterns. Throughout this chapter, I include examples from participants' responses to illustrate the findings and help readers connect more directly with the results. I also discuss the steps to ensure the study's trustworthiness and present the key findings. Each section is organized to describe the sample, data collection and analysis methods, and results. I include tables of the codes, categories, and themes identified in the study.

### **Setting**

For this basic qualitative study, I used Zoom to conduct one-on-one semistructured interviews from my private office. I explored the perspectives of 13 early childhood teachers with a minimum of 1 year of teaching experience. Participants were recruited through the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood teachers' social media platforms, and snowball sampling. All 13 interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Transcribe. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code, ranging from T1 to T13. There were no personal or organizational conditions that affected the gathering of data or interpretation of the findings. Data collection was conducted as proposed with no unforeseen or unplanned conditions affecting data.

### **Demographics**

In all, 13 participants provided data for this study. All 13 participants were early childhood teachers with experience teaching African American students. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 9 years to 32 years. Table 1 includes the participant ID, years teaching, years teaching early childhood, and years working with African American students.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Experience teaching	Experience teaching early childhood	Experience working with African American students
T1	29 years	29 years	29 years
T2	27 years	31 years	31 years
T3	32 years	28 years	22 years
T4	17 years	17 years	17 years
T5	9 years	6 years	9 years
T6	24 years	15 years	24 years
T7	25 years	23 years	25 years
T8	8 years	7 years	8 years
T9	31 years	15 years	31 years
T10	11 years	11 years	11 years
T11	4 years	4 years	3 years
T12	10 years	7 years	7 years
T13	30 years	30 years	30 years

**Data Collection**

The first step in data collection was to gain approval from the Walden University IRB. I recruited potential participants using the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood social media teacher groups. I employed the snowball method for recruitment to ensure sufficient participants and interview data. I posted an invitation on the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood social media teacher groups to recruit participants. To ensure participants met the selection criteria to participate in my study, I corresponded with them using my Walden account, and they responded using their school email address, which I used to confirm their eligibility for my study. Once eligibility was confirmed, I sent them a consent form via email. All willing participants sent a return email to me stating “I consent” to participate, along with the attached signed informed consent form, and were instructed to keep a copy for themselves. I allowed 7–10 business days to receive the needed consent. This recruitment process was used to

solicit participants until I reached enough participants. Respondents from these groups and individuals recruited via snowball sampling resulted in 13 participants in the study.

I used semistructured, one-on-one, audio-recorded interviews to collect data over 4 weeks. During interviews, participants elaborated on their personal experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon (see Knott et al., 2022) when responding to open-ended interview questions, follow-up questions, or probing questions. I scheduled and conducted interviews at a mutually agreed upon time.

Before starting the interview, I thanked each participant and reminded them that the interview would be audio-recorded via Zoom. I reminded each participant that the interview would remain confidential, they had the right not to answer any interview questions, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I enabled the audio-recording features on Zoom to capture the interview audio and disengaged the camera to protect the participants' identities. I used the interview protocol guide (see Appendix A), which included 10 in-depth, open-ended interview questions. Participants were interviewed once with no follow-up interviews. To ensure consistency, I asked each participant the interview questions in the same order. I posed one question at a time and repeated questions if necessary. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Both interview and follow-up questions were used to probe participants further and gain clarity. Taherdoost (2022) noted that follow-up or probing questions are essential for obtaining additional details. After each interview, I thanked each participant for their time and their contributions to the study. I explained how their input would be used, and I answered any additional questions they had about my study. I also explained

that I would provide them with a two-page summary of the findings once data were analyzed to ensure the accuracy of the findings and their experiences. I again thanked each participant and ended the recording.

After each interview, I downloaded the audio recordings from Zoom on my computer for easy access. I uploaded the audio recordings to Transcribe, an online program that is used to convert human speech into text. Participants were provided with a two-page summary and instructed to email any questions or concerns. If questions arose, follow-up discussions were conducted by telephone. Additional time was allotted for participants to respond. In the absence of a response after the summary was sent, it was assumed that participants had no concerns or questions.

I followed the data collection process exactly as described in Chapter 3. No unusual or unexpected events occurred during the data collection process. The data from each interview was securely stored on my password-protected computer and cannot be accessed by anyone else. My committee members and Walden faculty have access to data upon request. Five years after the completion of the study, I will permanently delete all files and data from my password-protected computer by removing them from my hard drive and cloud storage.

### **Data Analysis**

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. I used Transcribe, an online program to transcribe human text into speech, to transcribe each interview and to create individual transcripts. I

used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process to analyze the data collected in this study. The six phases include (a) familiarizing yourself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). No unexpected conditions were encountered during the data analysis process.

### **Phase 1: Familiarizing Myself With the Data**

I saved the transcripts as Word documents. I assigned all participants an alphanumeric identifier to maintain confidentiality. During Phase 1, I checked the written transcripts against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. After this step, I removed filler words such as "like" and "you know," words that carry no meaning, and any repeated words or phrases. Once transcripts were ready for analysis, I listened to the recordings several times and wrote down my thoughts, feelings, key terms, and potential themes in my reflective journal. I carefully read each interview transcript while making notes of my first thoughts and annotating the transcripts. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I focused on reading the information carefully to gain meaning from the participants' responses. I also looked back at my reflective journal notes, where I had written down any personal thoughts or possible biases and ideas about the data. This journal helped me think about what was included in the data and potential themes.

### **Phase 2: Generating Codes**

Interview data were inductively analyzed using open and axial coding strategies. During the open coding process, I read all transcripts a third time. Then, I reread each transcript line by line highlighting key concepts, words, and phrases. Open coding helped

me to reduce lengthy, complex interview transcripts into more discrete and manageable pieces of data by searching and identifying repeated words, phrases, or concepts within and across all transcripts. I made sure to note repetitions in my reflective journal. Next, I developed a codebook using Excel to store the open codes, corresponding transcript excerpts, and participants' IDs. I noted each participant's identification number in Column A, key excerpts from each interview in Column B, and the open code in Column C. Once open codes were identified, operational definitions of codes were created to standardize and identify a clear description of the data. The open codes were documented in an Excel-based codebook template using details such as the participant identifier, the open code, and the number of times the same open code was used. Through the open coding process, a total of 63 open codes were generated. Examples of open codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts from the data are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Examples of Open Codes*

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Lack of foundational skills	T1	“So, their foundations are behind when they come in. So, it’s like playing catch up the whole time.”
	T6	“Oh, lots of, I’ve encountered lots of challenges. Some of them stem from behavioral issues, but most of them stem from the fact that they, they don’t have a good set of foundational skills in front of them.”
Pacing of curriculum	T4	“One of the biggest challenges that I face is the pace of the curriculum.”
	T9	“Cause you know, these assessments are timed. Everything is, you know, you have to be able to write it out quickly and get your, you know, think, receive the information, think about it, and bring it back out in some kind of, you know, demonstrate some kind of understanding.”
Parental involvement	T6	“I think one of the biggest resources that I need, and I don’t know if this is really considered a resource, is parent involvement.”
	T8	“One of the biggest challenges has been parents accepting the fact that there is a gap or accepting the fact that they are part of the solution, so to speak.”
More PD for Teachers	T12	“I’ve had professional development where it’s targeted with reaching the socioeconomic disadvantaged children but not so much as targeting African American students.”
	T13	“So, I think more professional development with teachers have the opportunity to speak to each other, to know what’s going on.”
Culturally relevant materials	T5	“I would say that we need culturally relevant material”.
	T6	“I mean, we got to a point in the education where the books we were reading and the things we were exposing them to, they couldn’t relate even as far as, even in subject matter where the places they would talk about, they didn’t know anything about those places.”
Differentiated learning	T4	“I use those to do my reteaching, to do my grouping to decide who I need to pull aside before the bell rings, or how do I need to differentiate the homework.”
	T5	“I would say I differentiate by adjusting content process and assessments based upon the needs of my students, primarily within the African American community.”
Lack of resources for African American students	T5	“For me, that also looks like more finances and more resources in our inner-city schools to be able to give them better quality, excuse me, better quality resources, books, curriculum, technology, chrome things for an example like that.”
	T11	“I feel like when it comes to being in a public school, it’s, it’s hard to get ahold of things that these students, these students need versus like, because if you go to another school, they’ll have it..”
Socioeconomic factors affect academic achievement	T5	“Systematic inequalities leading to performance among African American students compared to our White peers.”
	T7	“there were some socioeconomic factors that were present and impacting this gap as well.”
No autonomy for teaching African American students	T3	“The teachers don’t have the autonomy to just teach them.”
	T9	“They really don’t have no autonomy on their learning or their achievement.”

Next, I applied axial coding to the open codes to determine relationships among the codes. I created a second Excel spreadsheet for my axial codes. In the spreadsheet, I included the participant's ID, axial code, and transcript excerpt. I followed a structured approach to organize and deepen my understanding of the data. First, I reviewed the initial codes, looking for ways to group similar ones into categories and make connections between them. To help me organize the categories, I color-coded each category during analysis. After I created the initial categories, I refined the categories and developed a working thematic map to analyze categories. I detailed how each category was interconnected. I created temporary categories that were either confirmed or modified based on observed patterns and connections that answered the research question. For each group, I examined how the codes matched and adjusted them as needed, refining and combining some groups where there was overlap or similarity. By comparing these temporary categories, I could see which ones represented broader themes or ideas in the data. This process helped me narrow the main themes to reflect the data. These refined categories became the foundation for the final themes, which I used to structure my findings and tell the story of the data. During axial coding, I identified nine categories. Table 3 provides examples of the categories and open codes derived from the participants' responses. Operational definitions for the codes were established to ensure consistency and provide a clear description of the data.

**Table 3***Examples of Open Codes and Categories*

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Parents must be involved	Parental involvement	T8	“One of the biggest challenges has been parents accepting the fact that there is a gap or accepting the fact that they are part of the solution, so to speak.”
	Parent education	T2	“I think that achievement gap really comes down to the education of guardians and parents.”
Teachers need more PD	More PD for teachers	T12	“I’ve had professional development where it’s targeted with reaching the socioeconomic disadvantaged children but not so much as targeting African American students.”
	Teacher must engage with each other	T3	“So, I think more professional development with teachers have the opportunity to speak to each other, to know what’s going on.”
African Americans lack exposure to needed basics	Lack of real-world experiences	T3	“I think it all stems from opportunities and experiences. So, there’s a big gap in that.”
	Lack of foundational skills	T6	“Oh, lots of, I’ve encountered lots of challenges. Some of them stem from behavioral issues, but most of them stem from the fact that they, they don’t have a good set of foundational skills in front of them.”
Autonomy lacking	No autonomy in teaching African American students	T3	“The teachers don’t have the autonomy to just teach them.”
	No autonomy for students	T9	“They really don’t have no autonomy on their learning or their achievement.”
African American culture must be included	Culturally relevant teaching	T12	“I’ve had professional development where it’s targeted with reaching the socioeconomic disadvantaged children but not so much as targeting African American students.”
	Culturally relevant materials	T6	“I mean, we got to a point in the education where the books we were reading and the things we were exposing them to, they couldn’t relate even as far as, even in subject matter where the places they would talk about, they didn’t know anything about those places”
African American students’ socioeconomic deficits	Socioeconomic factors affect academic achievement	T5	“Systematic inequalities leading to performance among African American students compared to our White peers.”
	Lack of resources for African American students	T11	“I feel like when it comes to being in a public school, it’s hard to get ahold of things that these students need.”
Strategies to individualize learning	Differentiated learning	T5	“I would say I differentiate by adjusting content process and assessments based upon the needs of my students, primarily within the African American community.”
	Personalized learning	T7	“I can look at what they need and then create something that addresses that specific need.”

**Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

After completing axial coding, I analyzed the categorized data to identify themes across the data set (see Byrne, 2021). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), during Phase 3 researchers consider how themes and codes are interconnected. I expanded upon the open and axial codes or categories generated in Phase 2. Categories were organized based on shared characteristics or meanings within the data. I reviewed the themes and concepts to verify that each was correctly placed and that the assigned name label accurately represented the categories. Three themes were extracted from the analysis of the data: (a) teachers believe they can close the achievement gap; (b) teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations; and (c) teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed.

**Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes**

In Phase 4, I reviewed and refined the codes and categories to ensure they were aligned with the themes. After reviewing and refining the identified codes and categories, I compiled a final list of the themes that answered the research question. This task enabled me to determine whether any missing information from earlier analysis phases may have been missed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), during this phase, researchers refine the boundaries of themes, explore their interconnections, and define the essence of each theme.

**Phase 5: Defining and Labeling Themes**

After defining and creating a list of the themes, I reviewed them to identify any connections. I checked that they matched the codes and data, making any necessary

adjustments. I then examined each theme to ensure it represented the data. I removed or adjusted any themes that overlapped. At this stage, I developed a clear definition for each theme, ensuring it was consistent and adding depth to my findings. Finally, I included themes in a narrative that clearly explained the results, supported by excerpts from the data. This systematic approach helped me capture both the details and the overall meaning of the data in a structured, thoughtful way. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that the researcher should clearly define the themes in narrative form. Table 4 displays a sample of the categories and themes generated during thematic analysis related to the research question.

**Table 4**

*Research Question, Categories, and Themes*

What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3?	
Categories	Themes
Teachers need more PD Teachers must engage with each other Parents must be involved Autonomy lacking African American culture must be included	Teachers believe they can close the achievement gap.
Academic gap is extensive African Americans lack exposure to needed basics African American students' socioeconomic deficits	Teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations.
Strategies to individualize learning Student engagement leads to success Teachers can influence African American learning	Teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed.

**Phase 6: Producing the Report**

Phase 6 concluded the data analysis process with a summary of the themes in a final report. I reviewed the themes to determine whether they answered the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that the final report must provide adequate

evidence of the themes in the data. After completing the data analysis, I verified that each theme answered the research question. There were no discrepant cases found during the analysis. Discrepant cases are instances in a study in which data differ from the established patterns, themes, or trends identified during the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Results**

I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American and White students in Grades 1–3, using a basic qualitative study with semistructured interviews. For each interview I conducted, I asked 10 open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A). The interview questions were developed using Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies framework and related literature. Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6 aligned with the constructs of the model of developmental competencies framework. Questions 1 through 10 were developed based on the information acquired from the literature review to understand the teachers' perspectives and answer the research question.

To present the results, I organized the findings by themes that answer the research question. Each theme is detailed with support from transcript excerpts to tell the participants' stories. In other cases, I summarized and synthesized the interview data to give an overview of the participants' intent.

## **Theme 1: Teachers Believe They Can Close the Achievement Gap**

### ***Teachers Need Professional Development***

Participants T3, T5, and T12 shared that they could close the achievement if they are provided professional development (PD) centered around CRT. They believed their instruction would be more effective, relevant, and meaningful with PD targeting this specific topic. Eight of 13 participants added that a CRT focus might help them to create a meaningful classroom environment by increasing student engagement through instruction that features the African American culture, which can address the academic achievement gap. T12 had PD but not specific to CRT and expressed the need for CRT PD saying, “it would be more professional development geared towards this focus [CRT] because the professional development I’ve gone to [was] not culturally relevant, ... if we had professional development that would target [CRT] to close that gap with African American students” These findings suggested that participants recognized CRT as a critical area for professional development, viewing CRT-focused training as essential for engaging African American students and helping to close the academic achievement gap.

T3 confirmed the need for more PD featuring CRT and expressed a desire to apply CRT in the classroom. This participant observed that early childhood teachers often are not informed about the differences in teaching African American and White students. T3 noted that all early childhood teachers would benefit from CRT to address cultural differences to close the achievement gap. T3 explained, “I like the cultural related teaching. I think a culturally responsive class would be beneficial, not just for me but for everybody.” The three study participants shared their beliefs that culturally responsive

professional development would help teachers design lessons relevant to students' experiences, allowing students to have a deeper connection to the curriculum and increasing student engagement.

One of the 13 participants shared how they believed PD on CRT could assist with providing participants with strategies to better understand and respect students' diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly African American students. T5 compared professional development offerings across school settings, noting that "the level, quality, and time spent for educators to go to workshops and development [is] a high priority ... primarily where you see a large White population." While culturally relevant professional development was limited, T5 emphasized its importance in inner-city charter schools, adding, "I, myself, would be interested in growing and learning more about culturally responsive teaching." This perspective highlighted the disparity in access to high-quality, culturally relevant professional development and emphasized the need for greater investment in training that supports teachers working with diverse student populations.

Participants T3, T5, and T12 stated that teachers need specific PD to support and implement CRT practices to help close the African American achievement gap. These participants believe PD centered on CRT empowers teachers to create lessons that resonate with their students' experiences and identities, which enhances student engagement and promotes academic success for African American students. These findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive professional development as a practical step toward promoting inclusive classrooms and addressing persistent achievement gap challenges.

### *Collegial Engagement*

Eight of the participants identified the need to engage with one another. Three participants described collegial engagement as including observations of experienced and highly skilled teachers, receiving coaching and modeling, and participating in professional learning communities (PLC). Two participants also explained that collegial engagement was an invaluable opportunity for professional growth. These participants expressed how the chance to observe other teachers would allow them to refine their instructional skills to help close the achievement gap. T8 explained that collegial engagement would assist them in improving their teaching strategies. T8 shared, “I would say more modeling, classroom teacher modeling or coach modeling sessions ... or seeing another teacher actually in action in a classroom.” These responses emphasized the importance of collaborative professional learning as a pathway to improving instructional practice and advancing academic outcomes for African American students.

One participant expressed frustration that teachers were being told what to do through directives and policies, but were rarely shown practical, hands-on strategies, leaving them without the necessary guidance to implement instructional changes in the classroom. T11 stated, “strategies that would’ve helped is with teachers being able to observe more. I think sometimes as teachers we’re told to do a lot of things, but it’s not shown to us.” These perspectives highlighted a broader need for instructional support that is grounded in modeling, observation, and opportunities to see effective strategies in action.

T13 shared that along with opportunities for teachers to observe other teachers, having opportunities for teachers to talk and collaborate with one another and allowing them to share ideas, strategies, and experiences that enhance instructional practices and improve student outcomes would be beneficial. T13 said, “So I think more [opportunities] where teachers have the opportunity to speak to each other, to know what’s going on.” T13 adamantly explained the importance for teachers to frequently engage with colleagues to discuss student progress and potential learning gaps. T13 shared, “I really believe it is very important that the school set aside a period where all teachers can meet weekly.” These experiences reflected a belief that regular opportunities for collaboration and open communication among teachers support instructional improvement and help address student learning needs more effectively.

Five participants emphasized the importance of collegial engagement and how working closely with other teachers positively influences student learning and academic growth, with some highlighting the value of engaging both with peers at their own grade level and with colleagues across different grade levels. T13 explained, “you have your cohort groups where your first and second [grade teachers] can meet at least two or three times a week before school or after school just to see what students are doing.” Another participant also shared experiences supporting struggling learners and addressing academic gaps, based on engaging PLCs with partner teachers and intervention specialists to dive deep into student data such as unit assessments and exit tickets. T5 stated, “with the school that I work at, one of the benefits is we meet as a grade level and we take our material, our assessments, our stats.” T1 shared their success, as an

intervention teacher, with promoting student academic growth and confidence. T1 said, “The best results I have is when I have a good working relationship with the classroom teacher.” Another participant noted that a key benefit of collegial engagement is the opportunity to collaboratively identify and address student learning gaps. T2 emphasized engaging with teachers to analyze student data from unit reading assessments to determine progress and promptly address student learning gaps in small groups. T2 shared, “we get to see the data of their [student] homeroom teachers ... and we go back and look to see what type of progress has been made.” These perspectives reflected a shared belief that consistent collaboration among teachers contributed to more effective use of student data, stronger instructional alignment, and improved academic outcomes.

Three of 13 participants expressed a strong need for collegial engagement through opportunities such as observing highly skilled and experienced teachers, receiving coaching and modeling, and participating in PLCs. These participants shared that these collaborative efforts offered critical benefits, such as enhancing teaching skills and providing specific support for student learning, both of which are essential to helping close the achievement gap for African American students. Five participants also shared that by working closely with peers in the same grade level, teachers from different grade levels, and intervention specialists, teachers can share strategies and insights that address specific learning needs and gaps. Eight study participants emphasized that collegial engagement created a more unified, supportive environment that benefits all students and contributes to meaningful progress in reducing educational disparities known as the achievement gap.

### ***Parental Involvement***

Ten of the 13 study participants shared that they need parental involvement. Most participants emphasized that teachers rely on parental involvement to help create a supportive learning environment where students can succeed. Ten of the study participants explained that parents are an essential factor in supporting their children's success in various ways, from reinforcing learning at home to promoting positive behaviors that align with classroom expectations. Participants shared that parents' attitudes about education and participation in their child's learning often affected academic achievement. T1 stated, "when kids have been taught the value of education, the learning and participating in their learning is a much easier process ... parents who are actively involved with homework, communicating with the teacher, those students always perform better." These findings indicated that participants perceived strong parental involvement as a key contributor to student success, particularly in early childhood settings, where collaborative partnerships between home and school were viewed as essential to supporting the academic achievement of African American students.

Nine participants believed that parental involvement in a child's education is often based on the parents' educational background. Most participants shared that in their experience parents who have higher levels of education are typically more prepared to understand the academic system, navigate school resources, and advocate effectively for their children's needs. Parents with limited educational experiences may feel uncertain or overwhelmed, hindering their ability to engage actively in their child's learning process.

T2 said, “I would say educated guardians and parents understand the value of education and they start earlier with doing academic things with their kids.” Only one participant revealed that, in their experience, a parent’s perception of the value of education strongly affected their child’s beliefs, as children often model their parents’ attitudes and behaviors. T10 discussed their experience, “I’ve had students literally tell me that their parents said that they don’t need elementary school, and they don’t need school to do things or to make money.” These insights suggested that both the educational background and the attitudes of parents toward schooling play a critical role in shaping the level and quality of their involvement in their children’s academic development.

One participant also described how a parent’s attitude and the way they communicate about and interact with their child’s teacher can have a substantial effect on the child’s academic achievement. When parents respect the teacher’s role, maintain open communication, and collaborate constructively, they reinforce a positive relationship that encourages the child to value their education. One participant shared that, negative attitudes or interactions between parents and teachers can lead to distrust or disengagement, which may affect the child’s motivation and performance in school. T13 stated, “The challenges primarily is the parents. You can’t get parents on board. They feel that you’re the actual teacher.” These perspectives highlighted the importance of promoting respectful and collaborative parent-teacher relationships to support students’ academic growth and strengthen their connection to learning.

Participants highlighted the importance of parental involvement, especially through reinforcing learning at home, as an important factor in supporting student

achievement. Five of 13 participants shared that when parents are actively involved in their child's learning outside of school, by helping with homework, reviewing class material, or practicing essential skills, students are more likely to succeed academically. These participants explained that this additional support at home not only strengthens understanding but also builds confidence, creating a foundation for better performance and ongoing success in school. T4 detailed how she promoted parental involvement by teaching parents how to reinforce learning at home by first teaching parents the lessons so they could confidently support their children's learning at home, recognizing that parents often struggled to help when they didn't fully understand the material themselves. T4 explained, "we implemented parent university ... in which we taught the parents some of the lessons on how we're doing the area model for multiplication because it could be foreign to them." This emphasis on reinforcing learning at home reflected participants' belief that equipping parents with the knowledge and confidence to support academic skills contributed to stronger student outcomes and greater family engagement in the learning process.

Ten participants in this study expressed a need for meaningful parental involvement to support students' academic and personal growth to help close the African American achievement gap. Ten of 13 participants shared that parental involvement creates a supportive network that enhances student motivation and achievement. Most participants emphasized the importance of parents helping to reinforce learning at home and promoting positive behavior. These participants explained that this kind of involvement strengthens the connection between home and school, creating a supportive

foundation that benefits students in multiple ways and enhances their chances for successfully closing the academic achievement gap.

### ***Autonomy***

Four of the participants expressed concerns and challenges with the lack of autonomy for teachers and students. The participants explained that lessons are scripted, and students are told what and how to learn. T3 shared their experience regarding a lack of autonomy, “One of the biggest challenges for me has been African American teachers are given a script for our African American students, wherein White students and even the black teachers that teach White students, don’t have a script.” One participant shared how the lack of autonomy in teaching and learning can create unfair differences, especially for African American students, limiting their ability to connect and succeed in the classroom.

Many teachers need more autonomy and input in developing instructional policies and educational regulations, which can hinder their ability to effectively address the unique needs of their students in the classroom. One participant expressed a desire for policymakers to have firsthand classroom experience, suggesting that those who create educational regulations should have been teachers themselves to better understand the realities of the classroom environment. T1 stated “What I wish is that the people who make the rules for classrooms would actually have been people who were teachers in the classroom.” This participant emphasized that a clear understanding of classroom dynamics and teachers’ perspectives is critical to providing meaningful support and effectively addressing students’ academic needs.

Two participants advocated for increased opportunities that allow teachers to express their opinions and participate in decision-making processes, rather than merely receiving information from outside speakers without any chance for feedback or input on new programs. T13 expressed, “They need to have more teachers voice their opinion as opposed to having people come in and just talk and the teachers have no feedback on it or introduce new programs, and the teachers have no voice in selection”. These responses reflected a desire for more inclusive professional environments where teachers’ insights are valued in shaping school initiatives and instructional decisions.

One participant also discussed that African American students often lack autonomy in the classroom, which can make them feel less connected, valued, and motivated to learn. The participant shared that the current standard teaching methods, curriculum, lesson plans, and rules do not fully reflect or respect African American students’ unique voices, backgrounds, or ways of learning. T9 mentioned that in their experience many early childhood students, particularly in Grades K through 3, lack autonomy in their learning and achievement. T9 said, “They’re [students] used to being told what to do, how to do it, when to do it ... Grades K through 3, really don’t have autonomy.” The participant also shared that the lack of autonomy can cause African American students to feel disconnected from school, making it harder for them to succeed.

Three of the 13 study participants shared significant concerns regarding teachers’ and students’ lack of autonomy within the educational system. One participant expressed that scripted lessons restrict teachers’ ability to adapt instruction to meet the diverse

needs of their students, leaving little room for creativity, differentiation, or personalization in the learning process. Additionally, the lack of input from teachers in creating instructional policies and educational regulations further intensifies this issue, as participants shared that they often feel disconnected from the decisions that directly affect their classrooms. One participant felt they were frequently excluded from voicing their opinions or participating in selecting programs that could enhance their teaching practices. These challenges emphasize the need for an approach that empowers teachers and creates a more responsive and effective learning environment for African American students.

### ***Culturally Relevant Resources***

Eight participants stated that access to culturally relevant materials and resources in the classroom is essential for supporting student learning and closing the academic achievement gap. The participants explained how student engagement improved amongst African American students when they were exposed to relevant materials and could see their cultures, histories, and identities reflected in the curriculum. One participant expressed having culturally relevant books, visuals, and learning tools allowed them to connect lessons to students' real-life experiences. T7 discussed the following:

we got to a point in the education where the books we were reading and the things we were exposing them to, they couldn't relate ... even in subject matter where the places they would talk about, they didn't know anything about those places.

T7 further explained, "Kids like learning about things that are about them. They like to read about people who look like them or who grew because of them." Five of the 13

participants described how access to culturally relevant resources led to noticeable increases in student engagement, particularly among African American students, by making learning more relatable and reflective of their identities. These responses highlighted that when students see their cultures and experiences represented in the classroom, it strengthens their connection to the material and promotes deeper academic involvement.

One participant shared that they believed having limited resources and a lack of access to culturally relevant materials all contribute to the academic achievement gap of African American students, and other students from marginalized communities. T5 said, “I would say that we need culturally relevant material ... curriculum-based teaching that comes from perhaps authors or even psychologists [with] a background working within the inner city [and] understands the demographic.” Most participants explained that creating engaging lessons and connecting them to students’ interests helped to develop a relevant learning environment and increased student motivation, participation, and understanding.

Most participants agreed that connecting the lesson to students’ cultural interests increased student engagement. T10 said, “Just making sure that learning is engaging. Connecting it again to their [students’] interests rather than throwing a piece of paper at them.” T12 explained how they use culturally relevant materials and adapt lessons and instruction in their class to meet each student’s individual needs. T12 explained, “it [instruction] has to be some kind of way culturally relevant ... just bringing in something from [or] making a reference from the community or asking students to participate in the

instruction from their perspective or their experience.” These perspectives demonstrated that when teachers incorporated students’ cultural interests and personal experiences into instruction, it created greater engagement and made learning more meaningful for their students.

Most participants in this study indicated the need for having access to culturally diverse, relevant, and meaningful resources to create a curriculum that reflects the experiences and identities of all students, promoting engagement and a sense of belonging. These participants also shared the desire to have the tools they need to implement CRT, connect with their students, address their unique learning needs, and promote a more inclusive educational environment. Participants expressed that all classrooms must have access to culturally relevant resources, which is critical in helping African American students reach their full academic potential.

Many participants in this study stated they need professional development, collegial engagement, parental involvement, autonomy, and culturally relevant resources to help close the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. More than half of the participants believed that quality professional development would better prepare them with CRT skills and strategies that meet the diverse needs of African American students. Five of 13 participants also stated that they value the chance to work closely with other teachers, sharing ideas and experiences to improve their classrooms. Most of the participants shared that parental involvement and building strong connections with families is essential, as it helps create a united approach to learning. Four of 13 participants also explained that they need more autonomy in their

classrooms to adjust lessons and activities based on African American students' unique strengths. Eight study participants also shared that access to resources that reflect diverse cultures and backgrounds is critical to helping African American students feel seen, respected, and motivated to learn. Teachers agreed that these tools and supports could make a significant difference in closing the academic achievement gap for African American students.

## **Theme 2: Teachers Believe the Academic Achievement Gap is Extensive Due to Unreasonable Expectations**

### ***Academic Achievement Gap***

Thirteen participants stated that the achievement gap between African American and White students remains a substantial and extensive issue and reflects the persistent gap in the educational outcomes of these students. T1 said, "There has been an achievement gap between White and Black students. For as long as I've been in education." Four participants explained that the academic achievement gap can be intensified by factors such as a fast-paced curriculum and frequent testing that often overlooks the diverse learning needs and backgrounds of African American students. These participants felt that the current pace of curriculum does not allow sufficient time for students to fully understand critical concepts. As a result, struggling students are often left behind, further widening the gap rather than closing it. T4 noted one aspect, "One of the biggest challenges that I face is the pace of the curriculum. Knowing that there is an achievement gap, meaning there are students that are not on level, yet the pacing doesn't slow down for these students." These responses revealed the importance of persistent

structural challenges, such as curriculum pacing and testing practices, that participants believed contributed to the continued disparities in academic outcomes between African American and White students.

Participants shared that the pacing of the curriculum, combined with the adequacy of teacher training and learning materials, is crucial in determining student outcomes and addressing the academic achievement gap between African American and White students. When teachers lack sufficient training or resources to navigate fast-paced curricula, they struggle to effectively support students, particularly those needing more time to master content. This gap between curriculum pacing and teacher preparedness can intensify the achievement gap, particularly for African American students, by failing to provide the necessary customized instruction and support. T7 explained, “I think that teachers need more opportunities to practice [teaching] and realistic timelines as it relates to producing their own growth. I think because we move so fast as it relates to teacher learning, sometimes the opportunities are missed.” These perspectives emphasized the significance of aligning curriculum pacing with adequate training and resources, as participants described how mismatches in these areas created challenges that impacted teachers’ ability to support African American students effectively.

One of the 13 participants also mentioned their challenges with fast-paced, timed assessments that require students to process information quickly. These assessments do not include the diverse ways students think and learn. These participants shared that this approach to testing does not account for students who may need more time to understand and respond to questions, particularly those with different learning styles or cognitive

processing speeds. Some students are unfairly disadvantaged and are hindered by an inaccurate reflection of their abilities and knowledge but might excel under less restrictive conditions. T9 conveyed a challenge experienced with assessments, “these assessments are timed ... maybe their thinking process is a little bit slower, but they still know the answer.” This statement highlighted the significance of considering diverse learning and processing styles, as participants described how fast-paced, timed assessments often presented challenges that limited students’ ability to demonstrate their knowledge accurately.

Early childhood teachers encounter challenges as they navigate the fast-paced curriculum, frequent and timed assessments, and unrealistic timelines, while striving to close the academic achievement gap between African American and White students. Most of the participants explained that without sufficient time, resources, and support to address diverse learning needs, they are often left struggling to support African American students who frequently are behind.

### ***Students’ Foundational Skills***

Nine of 13 study participants shared that early childhood teachers are challenged with helping African American students who may have had limited exposure to essential foundational skills needed for academic success. These nine participants explained that many students enter educational environments without foundational skills, which affects how they communicate and engage in productive, healthy learning experiences. T1 expressed how this challenge affected student learning overall, “Their foundations are behind when they come in. So, it’s like playing catch up the whole time.” T5 added that,

“A lot of the students, unfortunately, are coming from demographics and environments where certain fundamental skills have not yet been developed.” These perspectives highlighted the importance of early exposure to foundational skills, as participants described how limited readiness affected students’ ability to engage in learning and required sustained support from the start of their educational journey.

One participant indicated that throughout their years in education, they experienced various obstacles, arising from a lack of foundational skills. T6 explained, “I’ve encountered lots of challenges. Some of them stem from behavioral issues, but most of them stem from the fact that they [students] don’t have a set of foundational skills.” One participant emphasized that while behavioral issues posed challenges, the most significant obstacle they experienced was the students’ lack of strong foundational skills, affecting their academic success. T2 expressed that many students lack foundational skills because some parents, particularly within the African American community, prioritize life skills over academic preparation, often delaying focus on school readiness until later stages of development. T2 said, “It’s more of their teaching their kids how to get through life before they get to pre-K and kindergarten, not really teaching some of those foundational skills before they reach school.” These findings emphasized the significance of foundational skill development in the early years, as participants described how gaps in these areas created persistent challenges that impacted students’ academic progress over time.

Five study participants emphasized the need for earlier academic preparation, as the delay in building foundational skills can hinder students’ readiness and long-term

success in school. Eight participants also discussed challenges caused by students' lack of real-world experiences and how this challenge affected students' learning within the classroom. T9 explained,

we were testing, and the question was multiple choice and what was this picture? What did the students see? ... it was a windmill. I was working in the inner city. These students didn't have [any] idea of what this was ... for that picture to be there in this standardized testing, you're assuming that every student in the world has seen a windmill, and that's not the case.

T1 shared that many students struggle academically because they enter school without basic communication skills or essential life experiences that provide the background knowledge needed for early learning success. T1 said, "I think it starts because they don't come to school prepared with the basic communication skills, basic life experiences that give them background knowledge and give them opportunities to learn before they get to school." The eight participants expressed the importance of providing students with access to books and real-world experiences, explaining that these resources help deepen their understanding by allowing them to connect what they read with tangible, lived experiences. T3 stated, "Once they read about something, they need to experience whatever the character in the book was experiencing ... it just makes the world of difference when you're able to see it and feel it" These perspectives highlighted the significance of early academic preparation and real-world experiences in shaping students' readiness for learning and supporting their ability to make meaningful connections to academic content.

Among the participants, only one emphasized the need for African American students to see the world from different perspectives. This participant explained that students must be exposed to real-world experiences that broaden their understanding and allow them to connect classroom learning with diverse, lived realities. T4 stated, “My expectations for African American students is to become skill(ed) thinkers, independent problem solvers, and see the world from different perspectives ... if we teach kids how to learn ... they have the resources to go about figuring out.” These perspectives reflected a shared belief that promoting critical thinking and exposing students to varied life experiences equips them to navigate challenges independently and view the world through a broader, more informed lens.

Eight of 13 study participants consistently expressed that many students struggle to engage with educational content because they cannot relate to the books or subjects being taught, particularly when they lack familiarity with the places or experiences described. One participant explained that connecting places to the child was a struggle. T7 shared, “I recognize that there was a disconnect ... the books and the things we were exposing them to, they couldn’t relate ... I felt like I lost their interest.” These responses revealed a shared concern that when students do not see themselves or their experiences reflected in the curriculum, their interest and engagement in learning often decline.

Participants’ struggles were not limited to making students aware of a world outside of their environment. It was imperative that early childhood teachers consider students’ background knowledge and terminology to understand when preparing lessons. T8 emphasized the importance of not assuming that students are already prepared for a

lesson, but rather ensuring they have the necessary background knowledge and vocabulary to fully understand and engage with the content being taught. T8 explained that they made sure children “are familiar with the content or the topic first ... to see what is the background information that they need to know to be able to master this content.” T8 said, “I tried to understand from their perspective ... just trying to put myself in their perspective, what were the prerequisites or content or vocabulary that they may have needed to know what I’m talking about.” These insights reflected the importance of building lessons that acknowledge students’ prior knowledge and language development, ensuring they are equipped to engage meaningfully with new content.

Approximately 69% of participants explained that they encounter various challenges when supporting African American students in closing the achievement gap. Nine of the 13 participants shared that many African American students begin school without essential foundational skills, which affects their communication, participation in learning, and academic performance. One participant stated that while behavioral issues may arise, the biggest challenge stems from students’ lack of readiness and experience with basic skills. Eight participants also explained that many African American students lack real-world experiences, making it harder for them to connect with classroom lessons, especially when students encounter topics or images outside their experiential learning. To overcome these challenges, these participants expressed the importance of early academic preparation, access to culturally relevant resources, and opportunities for African American students to experience the world outside of school. The participants’ responses demonstrated that a lack of exposure to needed basics such as foundational

skills and real-world experiences among some children presents significant challenges to creating an effective and engaging learning environment to be used to close the achievement gap.

### *Socioeconomics*

Six of 13 participants also discussed challenges concerning students' socioeconomic deficits and how this affected student learning in the classroom. T3 noted, "White students have more access to what they need versus black students." These participants shared that the inconsistent access to quality education and resources between African American and White students created a significant gap in educational outcomes, perpetuating inequality and limiting opportunities for African American students to reach their full academic potential. T4 shared that African American students often experience educational challenges that lead to lower performance compared to their White peers, with disparities in test scores, graduation rates, college attendance, job opportunities, and financial stability. T4 explained, "The way I would describe [the] achievement gap between African Americans and White Americans is that it's an unequal output of education." The six participants described how disparities in access to educational resources and opportunities contributed to persistent gaps in academic performance, limiting long-term outcomes for African American students and reinforcing patterns of inequality.

Six participants expressed that systemic inequality is the main reason behind the academic achievement gap, as it continues to cause unequal access to resources, opportunities, and support for African American communities. T5 shared that in their

experience systemic inequality in school funding played a major role in the academic achievement gap, as it limited access to essential resources, learning opportunities, and support in many African American communities. T5 communicated, “The achievement gap reflects, in my observation and experience, systematic inequalities leading to performance among African American students compared to our White peers ... Some of those challenges would include limited resources” T5 went on to explain that schools in wealthier areas, which mostly serve White students, generally have more money and resources, like higher-quality materials, books, and technology, compared to inner-city schools, which often serve African American students.

Participant T7 explained that differences in income affected parental involvement and resources amongst families. T7 observed that in years working in education and working with both low-income and upper-middle-class families, upper-middle-class families often have more resources and time to invest in their children’s growth, while low-income families experience more constraints that can limit such opportunities. T7 continued:

The kids, I work with both in school and through my tutoring, range from no income to upper middle class. I have seen how parents who had the resources [and] the time to put into really growing their children was greater in families where the income was higher.

Most participants voiced frustration about the gap in foundational skills and real-world experiences among their African American students. They also expressed concern about differences in preparedness between African American students and their White

peers, explaining that students who begin school without basic skills often spend valuable time trying to catch up. Five participants emphasized the importance of equal resources to ensure African American students have the same opportunities to succeed from the start. They cited factors such as low socioeconomic status, limited funding, inadequate materials, and inconsistent parental involvement as ongoing challenges. These participants explained that without access to adequate resources and support, African American students encounter challenges that could be reduced through more equitable educational tools and opportunities.

### **Theme 3: Teachers Recommend Strategies That Help African American Students Succeed**

#### ***Individualizing Instruction***

Most participants recommended individualizing instruction to help African American students to be successful. Twelve of the 13 participants discussed using data to make instructional decisions and implementing differentiated instruction as crucial strategies for individualizing student learning. The 12 participants stated that these strategies were useful for teachers to design their teaching methods and resources to meet each student's unique needs and strengths, particularly those needing additional support. All participants in this study discussed the importance of collecting and using various types of student data to make instructional decisions. Participants explained that this was necessary because this practice helps meet each student's needs. T1 explained, "we [teachers] give them [students] an assessment to tell us where they're reading, what skills they're lacking, and what we need to do. I let the data from the assessment drive the

instruction.” Nine participants specifically described how differentiated strategies helped address individual learning needs and support academic growth among African American students.

The 12 study participants who differentiate learning shared how regularly assessing students and analyzing their progress helped them to identify specific areas where students may be struggling or excelling. Over half of the participants expressed that using data to assess mastery of content was beneficial for them to design instruction to address gaps in learning and challenge students who are ready for more advanced content. T9 made use of formative assessments and differentiated instruction, “Formative assessments are continuous ... I’m doing a quick assessment to not only find out what they know, [but] to find out, did I do what I was supposed to do?” Participants shared that consistently using student data allowed them to adjust instruction based on learning needs, address skill gaps, and provide appropriate academic challenges to support ongoing growth.

Twelve of the 13 study participants expressed that data-driven instruction provides a clear picture of where students are in their learning journey and helps to guide lesson planning and instructional strategies to support individual growth better. T3 used data to guide instruction and to determine next steps in planning and instruction. T3 said, “I look at that [data] and that’s guided my instruction more than anything. I still use my data to determine if I’m gonna keep on with the script or wait or go forward for the next day.” When asked to explain how data were used to make instructional decisions, T3 responded, “first you assess the student ... based on that assessment it’ll tell you what

stage they're in. I use my assessment so I can find my gaps and address them the next day." These responses reflected a shared view that using data to inform instruction allows teachers to respond more effectively to students' needs, ensuring that each child receives appropriate support at the right time.

All 13 study participants shared that teachers use data to drive and adapt their instruction by analyzing student performance and identifying areas where individual students may need additional support or challenges. This data-driven approach allows them to differentiate lessons, creating content and strategies to meet the unique needs of each student. T2 explained that data is useful to inform small group instruction. In this instance, data are reviewed to target specific skills, then the teacher personalizes learning opportunities and ensures that students receive the support necessary for their academic growth. T2 said, "we do go back and we look at those [data] to see what type of progress has been made ... then you go back and you give your [small] group whatever skill they need." T11 emphasized that looking at students' performance data, such as diagnostic and formative assessments, guided decisions about instructional practices." T11 explained, "What helped me decide to use [an instructional] practice was looking at their [students'] overall data. By using formative assessments, we can really check the most common things that the students have learned." T5 added, "once we determine where our children are then that allows me to strategically approach the curriculum and apply readjustments." T12 agreed, "we use all that data to integrate into our curriculum planning ... if we need to talk about retelling the story, then we need to go back and modify the curriculum to address that." Most participants said that data help teachers

intervene early and provide specific resources for students needing extra support, ultimately promoting a more personalized and effective learning environment. T7 stated, “I look at it after every chunk within a unit. I use that to see if they’re actually learning ... if they’re not, I’ll go back and do certain things.” Twelve of the 13 participants described using student data to guide instruction, modify curriculum, and personalize learning, noting that this approach allowed them to intervene early, adjust practices, and provide targeted support to promote student growth and close the achievement gap.

T10 shared that, to encourage accountability and support student learning, they regularly hold one-on-one conferences with their students after assessments, prompting students to reflect on their performance, identify successes, and suggest changes that might enhance their classroom experience. T10 said that this practice was useful to individualize instruction in future lessons. T10 explained, “I also conference with my students after assessments to ask them how they think they did [and] what went well.” These findings suggest that participants viewed student conferencing as a valuable strategy in early childhood classrooms for promoting self-reflection, encouraging accountability, and informing individualized instructional decisions, particularly to support the academic progress of African American students.

Most participants in this study expressed confidence in using data to make instructional decisions and address students’ learning gaps. Six participants explained that this data-driven approach is useful to implement specific interventions, monitor student progress, and adjust their teaching methods, ensuring all students receive the support they need to succeed. All participants detailed their experiences with

differentiated instruction and personalized learning and explained how these practices are essential to ensuring all students succeed. T1 said, “when I teach in small group the kids are placed in small groups by their individual needs.” T5 shared how useful differentiated learning was in the classroom, “I differentiate by adjusting content, process, and assessments based upon the needs of my students ... I assess [students] to identify gaps early on and then be proactive about adjusting instruction.” All 13 participants described using data to differentiate instruction and provide targeted interventions, emphasizing that this approach helped them address learning gaps and support the academic progress of all students more effectively.

One participant explained that they used data to differentiate the curriculum and instructional materials by grouping students based on their individual performance levels. T8 shared, “when it comes to differentiating the curriculum and instructional materials, I normally group the students based upon their level ... I group them according to [ability groups] and make sure that they’re working according to their level.” These findings emphasized the significance of differentiated instruction and data use in addressing learning gaps and supporting students’ academic progress based on their individual needs.

T5 explained that differentiated instruction and personalized learning are useful to modify content, process, and product based on each student’s readiness level, interests, and learning profile. Most participants explained that providing personalized learning experiences helped them engage students at their own pace, offer more support, or challenge students when necessary. Most participants also shared that they often adapt

assignments to meet African American students where they are in their reading skills.

One participant explained they adjust the materials so all students can engage with the content in a way that suits their learning needs. T8 said, “to differentiate an assignment or find a lower Lexile passage of the same (or) similar passage ... I would do an on-level passage for students who are reading or have met mastery.” Another participant explained how they adjust lessons to support African American students at different learning levels within the same class. It is possible to have multiple reading levels within a classroom. T2 explained,

within one group of students that I pull, I might have two different levels. I start with one level at my teacher table. The other kids will be doing something independently on their level, for example, iReady. And then I would switch it out.

T7 described how they design lessons to meet each student’s specific needs. T7 also shared, “I can look at what they need and then create something that addresses that specific need ... I make sure there’s a direct alignment between what they need and what I’m providing.” These findings emphasized the significance of adapting instruction to meet the diverse reading levels of African American students, demonstrating how they adjusted materials and approaches to ensure all students could access and engage with the content.

Two participants shared that using data allows teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their students’ learning gaps. This becomes evident in specific areas where students may be struggling. These participants explained that analyzing performance on assessments, assignments, or even informal checks like exit tickets, helps

teachers identify patterns of misconceptions or errors. Participants also stated that it helps teachers pinpoint not just what students are missing, but why they are missing it, allowing for specific interventions. T13 examines student data over time to identify trends and to adjust teaching methods or materials to ensure that learning gaps are effectively closed. For example, if students plateau, T13 would “dig deeper to figure out what was going on, then give [that student] extra instructions or pull them [into small groups].” These findings emphasized the importance of using data to identify learning gaps, interpret student needs, and make informed decisions about providing targeted instructional support.

T9 explained that students come with varying abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds in a diverse classroom, so creating lessons to meet their unique needs is critical. T9 uses multiple intelligences to teach according to children’s learning styles. This teacher believes that “most teachers teach the way they learn” instead of teaching to their students’ multiple intelligences. Twelve participants revealed they were confident in differentiated instruction and personalized learning to support student learning and help close the African American achievement gap. These participants shared that adapting their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students can promote student engagement and a deeper understanding of the material. These practices involved using a variety of strategies for different purposes, yet with the intent of improving student performance to close the achievement gap.

### *Student Engagement*

Six of 13 participants shared that student engagement is vital for creating academic success among African American students because it promotes active participation, strengthens motivation, and helps build a deeper connection to the learning process. T5 stated, “I know that success can come from student engagement.”

Participants T3, T5, T10, and T12 shared that creating engaging lessons and making school enjoyable for African American students resulted in a shift in students’ perspectives on learning and a positive mindset that can contribute to increased academic success. T10 took the opportunity to tell students the value of school by connecting the content they were learning to real-world applications. Students were informed that the knowledge they gained could benefit them in careers where mathematics or reading skills are crucial for success. T10 showed, “them [students] the importance of why we go to school by making school and learning fun ... connecting it to their interests ... [like] boys wanting to be pro athletes. ... you have to read a playbook ... understand math ... run plays ... know angles.” These perspectives indicated that participants viewed student engagement as a meaningful approach to promoting academic success by increasing motivation, encouraging participation, and connecting learning to students’ interests and goals.

Most participants emphasized the critical role of active learning and the importance of capturing students’ interest to promote deeper academic engagement. Twelve participants explained that in their experiences, student engagement is strengthened when teachers stay connected with students’ cultural and social worlds.

Understanding students' language and experiences helps create a learning environment that supports their academic growth and success. T9 stated, "I would like to know the jargon that they're using in their conversations with each other ... I want to know so that I can support them in their learning process." These findings showed that participants described the value of understanding students' cultural and social contexts to strengthen engagement and support academic development.

Six of the 13 participants in this study emphasized the importance of connecting with students' interests, explaining that this strategy builds strong relationships, trust, and personal connections, promoting student success. T7 said, "I kept their interests, and it helped to build relationships and students respond to people who they like, who believe in them and see something in them." These strong bonds between teachers and students led to student engagement when working with African American students, as it helps create a learning environment that is both meaningful and supportive. These participants also stated that they make learning more relatable and exciting by connecting lessons to students' interests while incorporating aspects of their social culture. They believed that these practices helped build deeper connections with their students by promoting trust and understanding. These positive relationships lead to greater academic achievement and a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom for African American students.

### ***Building Relationships to Support African American Student Success***

Eleven participants shared that building strong, trusting relationships with students is essential for strengthening academic achievement, particularly for African American students. African American students often encounter systemic challenges that

affect their academic experiences. Nine out of 13 participants discussed the importance of developing relationships that affirm students' identities and performance, and to reduce systemic challenges for African American students. T1 shared the importance of caring for students, "I am a firm believer in the John Maxwell quote that 'Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.' I try to build relationships, so they know that I care about their learning." T10 also shared the importance of building relationships with students by caring. T10 stated, "just building relationships (and) showing them that I care about them, and I care about their future, what they're gonna do, and just being involved in their lives." T10 highlighted that when teachers show interest in students' personal lives, it helps build strong relationships that can promote a sense of trust and support, ultimately contributing to students' academic success and achievement. T10 went on to explain, "if they're in sports and they give me a schedule, I try to show up to their games. If I don't show up at least [I'll] ask them about it ... that way they see that I do care about them." T6 also practiced building strong relationships with students. T6 incorporated students' interests, likes, and hobbies into lessons, making learning more relevant and engaging for each student. Making the lesson focused on students' interests sends a message about building strong relationships with students.

Eleven participants explained how teachers can help close the African American achievement gap, increase confidence, and encourage students when they endeavor to know and build relationships with their students. T5 stated that since the pandemic, teachers and school leaders have had to place a greater emphasis on supporting students' social and emotional development. The pandemic caused school closures and other

challenges that affected both the academic progress and emotional well-being of many students. As a result, teachers recognized the need to help students rebuild confidence, manage stress, and reconnect with their peers to create a stronger foundation for learning. T5 said, “I am spending more time creating space for dialogue ... at the beginning of our day, I start with inviting the children into a space of talking about how are you doing.” T5 emphasized that by prioritizing students’ social and emotional development and building strong relationships, teachers can create a supportive environment that can positively affect students’ academic achievement. T5 further explained, “It [supporting social emotional development] also entailed building strong relationships with our students, which [was] guided [by] differentiated planning.” These findings highlighted how participants emphasized the importance of relationship-building and social-emotional support as foundational strategies teachers used in response to students’ post-pandemic needs and to promote conditions that support academic growth.

T9 shared that they use psychologist Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences to build relationships and to know their students. T9 explained that using multiple intelligences helped to understand their students’ preferences, strengths, and learning styles, and helped to create a more personalized and engaging lesson. T9 shared that their methods for understanding their students also created a teacher mindset to acknowledge and value each student’s identity; therefore, promoting a more supportive learning environment. T9 used multiple intelligence surveys to determine children’s strengths and preferred learning styles. This participant also shared how multiple intelligences helped ensure that all students feel seen, heard, and capable of success.

Eleven of the 13 participants in this study believed that they could influence learning among African American students by building relationships with students. When strong relationships were established, teachers were able to create effective learning environments, promote student engagement, and build student confidence. This influence encouraged a sense of trust and belonging, which supported increased motivation and participation, especially among those students who experience systemic challenges.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, researchers need to ensure that their work is reliable and can be trusted (Stahl & King, 2020). Reliability and trustworthiness are established by focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility and trustworthiness mean that the study findings are believable and make sense. According to Burkholder et al. (2019), transferability is significant and refers to how effectively the researcher's findings can be applied to various situations. Another vital factor is dependability, which refers to the consistency of the research methods and their ability to be replicated (Burkholder et al., 2019). Researchers also consider confirmability, which involves being transparent and clear about how conclusions are reached (Stahl & King, 2020). These essential factors help researchers ensure that their work is dependable and trustworthy.

I made no changes to the methods that were outlined in Chapter 3. I confirmed that all participants met study criteria. All participant interviews were audio-recorded, notes were made in a reflective journal, and member checking was performed to ensure the trustworthiness of the research results. No discrepant cases were identified.

## **Credibility**

To establish the credibility of this study, I used member checks as a method of validation. Member checking involves verifying the study's findings by sharing them with participants. This process encourages participant engagement and allows them to confirm, adjust, or challenge the researcher's interpretations, thereby improving the validity and credibility of the study's results (Erdmann et al., 2023). Member checks help reduce the chances of misinterpreting participants' expressions, actions, and perspectives on events (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

To ensure that I gathered a complete and thorough understanding of the subject, I aimed to reach data saturation through my research methods. To reach data saturation, I conducted semistructured interviews with 13 early childhood teachers in Grades 1–3, who had at least 1 year of experience. Researchers found that most studies with similar groups of participants and clear goals reached data saturation after nine to 17 interviews or four to eight focus group discussions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). I established rapport with participants by creating a comfortable and respectful environment, actively listening, and showing a genuine interest in their experiences. I conducted interviews until data saturation was achieved to reduce potential limitations associated with the small sample size in this study. I followed the interview protocol closely and used a reflective journal to track and mitigate potential bias during the research process. The goal was to generate credible findings that accurately reflected the perspectives shared by the participants.

I further ensured credibility by conducting member checks and providing participants with a two-page summary of study findings. Participants were allowed to

raise any concerns or questions about inaccuracies of their data in the two-page study findings after the data analysis was finished, which were emailed to each of them. I recorded the comments and concerns shared by the participants. To further enhance the credibility of the study, a comprehensive coding table was included (see Appendix B), detailing the open codes, axial codes, and corresponding themes to demonstrate a systematic thematic analysis process.

### **Transferability**

To enhance transferability, I provided a thick description of the data and the research context, allowing readers to assess my findings and make informed judgments about whether the conclusions could apply to future research contexts, particularly regarding early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the African American achievement gap. Ravitch and Carl (2016) described thick description as a strategy that supports transferability by providing a detailed account of the study's setting and participants. Additionally, I included relevant but non-identifiable characteristics of participants. I provided the participants' demographic information such as education, length of career, duration of time working with African American students, and details about the study's setting, enabling readers to evaluate transferability or make comparisons.

### **Dependability**

To enhance dependability, I used an audit trail. This involves keeping a clear, detailed record of the research process, including decisions, actions, raw data, memos, and notes, which together create a transparent account of each step in data collection,

analysis, and interpretation. I demonstrated the dependability and reliability of the results by recording each interview using Transcribe to capture the participants' responses accurately. I recorded notes on decisions made throughout the research process, including sampling, data analysis, reflections, and data management. I provided a detailed explanation of the research methodology, and the data collection procedures employed. I recorded the research process, highlighting any changes or adjustments that took place. Providing a detailed description of the study design and process helps others comprehend and assess the methods used. I kept a reflective journal to avoid bias during data collection and analysis. I followed the interview protocol, asking all participants the same questions. Before each interview, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All study participants were sent a two-page summary of the study findings for member checking to further ensure the results' dependability. The participants had no further comments after reviewing the summary.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the study's findings are determined by the participants' responses and experiences, rather than by the researcher's personal biases, motivations, or perspectives (Johnson et al., 2020). This component of research rigor is essential for establishing the credibility and reliability of the study (Kyngäs et al., 2020). Confirmability ensures that the data and interpretations are objective and can be traced back to the sources (Nguyen et al., 2021). To prevent personal biases from affecting the study's results, I put aside any preexisting beliefs regarding racism, stereotypes, and both implicit and explicit biases toward African American students. The

data came directly from participant interviews rather than my assumptions. I relied on recordings and transcripts of the interviews during the analysis of the information. Confirmability was also established through reflexivity and documenting any biases in my reflective journal. Documenting these reflections allowed me to stay aware of my perspective, ensuring it did not affect the research findings. Confirmability was achieved by minimizing researcher bias and ensuring the data reflected the participants' perspectives. Reflexivity was also maintained by transcribing the interviews verbatim, using Transcribe and checking each transcript for accuracy.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 detailed an explanation of the data collected and analyzed, using direct quotes from study participants. Semistructured interviews were conducted to gather early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. Throughout the research process, I kept a reflective journal. I used open and axial coding by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Three themes emerged from the data to answer the research question: (a) teachers believe they can close the achievement gap; (b) teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations; (c) teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed.

The first theme was teachers believe they can close the achievement gap. Teachers discussed the need for culturally relevant professional development to equip them with more effective strategies for working with African American students.

Teachers expressed their desire to engage with one another and view other teachers to gather ideas on better strategies and ways to improve their teaching skills. All participants discussed how the lack of parental involvement was a detriment to students' academic success. Participants also shared that students' attitudes about education were often due to their parents' views and attitudes. Several teachers felt overwhelmed by the lack of autonomy in instruction, and the number of directives and policies being given by people outside of the classroom without guidance on proper implementation. Participants shared their frustrations with the lack of culturally relevant materials and resources in African American and low-income schools. Participants shared that African American students were often disconnected and disassociated from the lessons because of a lack of experience, exposure, and background knowledge.

The second theme was that teachers believe the academic achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations. This theme emerged from participants expressing frustration with the extensive achievement gap and experiencing African American students entering their academic careers unprepared and lacking the basic skills needed to be successful. Participants also expressed frustrations with unreasonable expectations such as lack of time, frequent testing, and fast-paced scripted curriculum. Nearly every teacher expressed that African American students lack real-world experiences and foundational skills, which they believed were the leading cause of the African American achievement gap. Participants mentioned that African American students' lack of exposure and experiences caused a disconnect in their learning. Participants shared that the gap is perpetuated because teachers are trying to catch

students up each year without adequate materials and resources that are often readily available in White and higher-income schools. Participants shared that African American students who are beginning school lacked basic skills, and the curriculum pacing made it challenging to address learning gaps effectively. Participants also mentioned the challenge of students' socioeconomic deficits. Participants stated that unequal access to quality education and resources between African American and White students leads to a significant gap in learning. Participants expressed that systemic inequality perpetuates the academic achievement gap because it keeps African American communities from getting equal access to resources, opportunities, and support. Participants stated that this inequality makes it difficult for African American students to reach their full academic potential. Participants also said that differences in income affected how much parents could be involved and what resources families had.

The third theme was that teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed. This theme emerged because all participants shared experiences of how building relationships with students enabled them to reach students and positively affected student learning. Participants shared how students became engaged in the lessons, and through building relationships teachers could personalize and connect lessons to students. Participants also shared how using data to make instructional decisions, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning allowed them to close gaps and help students make gains.

In Chapter 5, I interpret the study's findings, discuss its limitations, offer recommendations for further research, and discuss its implications. Additionally, I

analyze each theme, highlighting their alignment with the research question and the literature review from Chapter 2. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how this study can contribute to positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. In this qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives, which can be used to inform instructional practice, policy, and professional development in early childhood education. I used semistructured interviews conducted via the Zoom platform to gather data. The 13 participants were early childhood teachers with at least 1 year of teaching experience. Three themes emerged from data analysis: (a) teachers believe they can close the achievement gap; (b) teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations; (c) teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed.

In Chapter 5, I explain the findings of this study and provide the perspectives of early childhood teachers on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. I use Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies to ground the study and understand how teachers' classroom practices and use of resources affect the skills and achievements of minority students. This chapter also includes the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## Interpretation of the Findings

### Theme 1: Teachers Believe They Can Close the Achievement Gap

#### *Teachers Need Professional Development*

The findings from this study indicated that three early childhood teachers viewed culturally relevant professional development (PD) as essential for closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. Half of the participants consistently emphasized that culturally unresponsive teaching created a disconnect between African American students' cultural identities and the curriculum, ultimately limiting student engagement and academic performance. This aligned with existing research, which found that when instruction did not reflect students' backgrounds and lived experiences, students often felt unseen, disengaged, and unsupported (Kehl et al., 2024; Lawson, 2021; Malone et al., 2023; Mehta, 2024). These perspectives highlight the importance of providing teachers with the tools and knowledge needed to create inclusive learning environments where all students feel recognized and supported.

Participants' statements concerning culturally relevant PD suggested that many professional learning opportunities failed to adequately address the social, cultural, and educational needs of African American students. For example, T5 and T6 noted the absence of PD specifically focused on the education of African American students and the lack of individualized strategies for addressing racial achievement gaps. This supported the findings of Abdalla and Moussa (2024), who emphasized that investing in

culturally responsive training was critical for establishing learning environments where marginalized students could succeed academically and socially.

The perspectives of participants extended the literature by reinforcing the role of professional development in equipping teachers with tools to build inclusive classrooms and create meaningful student relationships. Culturally relevant PD helped promote instructional approaches that affirmed student identities, built on their strengths, and supported classroom communities that reflected and respected cultural diversity (Dyches et al., 2022; Franco et al., 2023; Mburu, 2022). More than half of the study participants described how strong, supportive relationships with students contributed to increased engagement, confidence, and academic growth, an outcome consistent with research emphasizing the importance of student-teacher relationships in CRT (Franco et al., 2024; Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). These findings reinforce the value of culturally relevant professional development in creating authentic connections that support both student achievement and a sense of belonging.

Findings of this qualitative study supported Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children, which highlighted the importance of recognizing students' unique experiences, strengths, and cultural contexts to promote growth. Participants T3, T5, and T12 expressed that culturally relevant PD helped teachers understand how students' environments influenced their learning and development and informed the modification of instruction. This finding aligned with the work of Ma et al. (2024) and Ober et al. (2023), who stated that culturally grounded

professional learning improved teachers' ability to respond to the academic and cultural needs of diverse learners.

### ***Collegial Engagement***

The findings of this study also revealed that eight early childhood teachers viewed collegial engagement and teacher collaboration as critical to their professional growth and as essential strategies for addressing the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. Five participants emphasized that working alongside colleagues, through observations, coaching, and participation in PLCs, enhanced their instructional practices and provided opportunities to learn and refine strategies designed to the diverse needs of their students. Participants T8 and T11 shared that observing highly skilled teachers allowed them to witness effective teaching in action and transfer those practices into their own classrooms. As T8 explained, observing experienced teachers and seeing how they managed instruction in real-time would be a valuable learning experience. This aligned with existing research that supported the value of observational learning, collaboration, and mentorship in building instructional capacity (Hill & Papay, 2022; Nordgren et al., 2021; Reddig et al., 2021). These insights highlight the importance of creating collaborative learning environments where teachers can grow through shared expertise and ongoing professional dialogue.

Two participants also highlighted that collaboration across grade levels and with content peers enabled them to exchange ideas, share strategies, and collectively address challenges faced by African American students. This finding was consistent with research showing that collaborative practices among teachers contributed to improved

instructional alignment, consistency in expectations, and more effective learning environments that benefit all students (Christensen, 2024; Mora-Ruano et al., 2021; Shand & Goddard, 2024; Vats et al., 2023). T11 noted that coaching and PLCs would help teachers enhance their methods and better support students, while T1 described how working closely with classroom teachers helped ensure success for small group instruction, particularly for students receiving intervention services.

These findings extended the literature by demonstrating that collegial engagement has a direct role in supporting teachers to close the achievement gap through collective expertise and ongoing support. As the eight participants explained, these collaborative structures, especially PLCs and coaching, created intentional spaces where teachers could explore targeted strategies for addressing challenges such as early academic skill gaps and social-emotional development in African American students (Hernandez, 2022; Maryland State Board of Education, 2021). Through these settings, participants developed a deeper understanding of how to respond to the unique needs of their students by sharing culturally relevant and inclusive instructional practices.

The perspectives of participants aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children, which emphasized the importance of creating enriched, responsive educational environments that recognize and respect cultural and developmental differences. Five participants in this study viewed collegial engagement as a mechanism for enhancing those environments, promoting instructional practices that were developmentally appropriate, culturally grounded, and responsive to the lived experiences of African American students. As noted by Hernandez (2022),

when teachers work together to share knowledge and improve instruction, they are better able to create student resilience, affirm cultural identity, and support academic growth, all of which are essential to closing long-standing achievement gaps.

Close to half of the participants in this study affirmed that collegial engagement was not only beneficial to their own professional development but essential to creating equitable learning environments where African American students could academically succeed. The ability to learn from one another, share best practices, and collectively respond to instructional challenges enabled teachers to create culturally responsive classrooms that empowered all students to succeed.

### ***Parental Involvement***

The findings of this study revealed that over half of the participants considered strong parental involvement essential for supporting the academic success of African American students. Ten out of 13 participants emphasized that parents played a foundational role in a child's educational journey by reinforcing learning, promoting positive attitudes toward school, and helping to address classroom challenges. Five of 13 participants explained that when parents were actively engaged by supporting homework, attending school functions, or communicating consistently with teachers, students were more likely to experience academic growth and develop a stronger sense of motivation and self-worth. These perspectives aligned with research showing that parental involvement significantly influenced students' academic performance and overall success (Gay et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2021; Motshusi, 2024). As a result, participants viewed

parental involvement not as a supplement to learning, but as a vital component of student achievement.

Most participants emphasized that addressing the academic development of African American students required active involvement beyond the school setting. T8 clearly stated that closing the achievement gap “cannot solely be done at school,” reinforcing the idea that collaborative support between schools and families was necessary. Teachers explained that parental engagement helped bridge the gap between home and school and created an environment that promoted consistency, high expectations, and resilience. These findings were consistent with research suggesting that strong home school partnerships helped address both academic and socioemotional needs, particularly for minority students facing systemic challenges (Eden et al., 2024; Gale, 2024; Kantova, 2024). Participants believed that when families and teachers worked together with shared responsibility, students received the consistent support needed to thrive both academically and personally.

More than half of the participants’ insights also reflected the principles of Coll and Lamberty’s (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children, which emphasized the importance of a child’s broader social context including family, school, and community systems in supporting their development. Most participants in this study recognized that African American students benefitted academically and emotionally when teachers and families worked together to create culturally responsive and supportive learning environments, a finding consistent with the conclusions of Gay et al. (2021) and Lawson (2021). As T4 noted, providing guidance to parents on how to

assist their children with homework helped strengthen foundational academic skills while reinforcing the connection between home and school. Participants T1, T2, T4, T7, and T8 described how sharing instructional strategies and learning goals with parents encouraged more consistent academic support outside the classroom (see Griffin et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2021). These efforts not only deepened family engagement but also helped students perceive education as a collaborative effort grounded in trust and shared responsibility.

Four participants acknowledged that challenges such as poverty often limited parental participation. Less than half of the participants reported working in schools where many families faced economic hardship, resulting in limited time, resources, and capacity to engage fully in their children's education. This was consistent with research indicating that economic constraints often interfered with parental involvement, particularly in under resourced communities (Ahm et al., 2024; Motshusi et al., 2024; Ndwandwe, 2023). Despite these challenges, participants stressed the importance of developing strategies that were sensitive to the realities of low-income families. Close to half of the study participants advocated for flexible engagement opportunities, parent education programs, and intentional outreach to help families feel more connected and empowered to support their children's learning (see Johnson et al., 2021). These findings highlight the need for schools to adopt inclusive family engagement practices that account for economic realities and actively support stronger home-school partnerships.

One participant shared creative strategies that promoted parent student collaboration, such as book clubs that required joint participation in planning and discussion. T7 described how these activities strengthened relationships and contributed

to students' academic growth. This type of parent involvement aligned with literature suggesting that family engagement enhanced both academic and social emotional outcomes for students (Motshusi, 2024; Schmid & Garrels, 2021). T1, T2, T4, and T7 believed that when parents were actively engaged in learning activities, students were more likely to take pride in their work and view school as a shared priority (see Gay et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2021). These findings suggest that collaborative parent-student initiatives may not only promote academic improvement but also build a stronger sense of belonging and motivation among students. Encouraging school officials to design interactive opportunities that invite family participation could help strengthen school-home connections and student engagement.

Most participants consistently expressed that building meaningful partnerships with parents played an important role in supporting African American students' academic progress. By promoting collaborative relationships with families and addressing the socioeconomic challenges that often limited participation, educators and school stakeholders were able to promote learning environments that supported both academic achievement and personal growth. These efforts, grounded in culturally responsive engagement and community collaboration, aligned with the developmental competencies framework and reflected practices participants believed contributed to more inclusive and effective teaching necessary to close the achievement gap.

### ***Autonomy***

The findings from this study indicated that although only two participants addressed the issue of autonomy (T3 and T9), both viewed teacher and student autonomy

as essential for closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. T3 emphasized that limited autonomy in instructional decision making hindered their ability to respond effectively to the unique academic, developmental, and cultural needs of African American students. Five out of 13 participants reported that rigid curricular structures, pacing mandates, standardized testing, and inflexible instructional guidelines frequently restricted their capacity to modify lessons to students' interests, strengths, and cultural backgrounds. T3 specifically noted that the lack of autonomy made it difficult to close learning gaps, as teachers were unable to design instruction to the needs of their students (see Hanson et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021). These findings were supported by literature that identified overly standardized environments as challenges to differentiated and CRT (Chang et al., 2022; Choi & Mao, 2021; Fenuku & Akpaku, 2024; Narayanan et al., 2023; Yorulmaz & Colak, 2023). These insights highlight the need for schools to adopt inclusive family engagement practices that acknowledge economic barriers while promoting meaningful parent-school partnerships.

All participants shared that when granted instructional autonomy they were able to implement creative, student-centered strategies that promoted deeper engagement, cultural inclusion, and academic growth. This finding aligned with studies suggesting that autonomy allowed teachers to be more responsive, innovative, and inclusive in their instructional practices, particularly when teaching culturally and developmentally diverse learners (Ma, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). T7 explained that when they had the flexibility to design lessons around students' needs, they could ensure that instruction aligned to both

developmental readiness and academic expectations. This participant emphasized that teacher autonomy was critical in developing learning environments where African American students felt seen, supported, and capable of success.

The findings from the study aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children, which emphasized the importance of creating flexible, responsive environments that reflect students' cultural and developmental needs. According to the model, learning was most effective when children were supported by teachers who were empowered to respond to their unique strengths and challenges. When teacher autonomy was constrained by external mandates and pacing schedules the potential for meaningful interaction between the learner and their environment was diminished, hindering both academic progress and the development of key competencies (Niklas et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2024).

T9 also expressed concerns about the limited autonomy of students. T9 described how tightly controlled instructional settings restricted students' ability to explore, make choices, and engage in self-directed learning. This finding is consistent with Gay et al. (2021), Dotterer et al. (2022), and Sullivan et al. (2023), who emphasized that tightly controlled instructional settings often restrict student autonomy, reducing opportunities for self-directed learning and deeper engagement. Two of the 13 participants explained that this lack of autonomy negatively affected students' ability to develop important competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, resilience, and self-awareness. T9 emphasized that young children need time and space to discover their identities and capabilities, stating, "They are just coming into the world, at that age they need more

time to explore the world around them.” These insights were consistent with research that highlighted student autonomy as a driver of motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive growth, especially for minority students navigating complex social and academic contexts (Brandišauskienė et al., 2023; Han, 2021; Xu et al., 2024). These perspectives indicate the importance of allowing young learners the freedom to explore, make choices, and develop essential cognitive and social skills through self-directed experiences.

Curriculum pacing emerged as another significant factor limiting autonomy. A participant reported that standardized pacing schedules did not account for the diverse readiness levels, prior experiences, and cultural backgrounds of African American students. This finding aligns with research that found standardized pacing structures often overlook the cultural and academic diversity among African American students, limiting opportunities to meet their developmental needs effectively (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2020). T4 explained that even though students began school with fewer foundational skills and less exposure to real world experiences, they were still expected to meet the same benchmarks at the same pace. This disconnect between curriculum expectations and student needs restricted teachers’ ability to scaffold learning and provide culturally relevant instruction. These findings aligned with research that criticized rigid pacing models for perpetuating inequities and undermining culturally responsive pedagogy (Bertram et al., 2021; Geller et al., 2023; McBride, 2023). These findings emphasize the need for instructional pacing that aligns students’ developmental readiness and lived experiences, allowing all learners an equitable opportunity to succeed.

According to Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model, student development was shaped through continuous interaction with educational and cultural environments. When pacing guides fail to provide the flexibility necessary for these interactions to occur, students' developmental competencies cannot be fully realized (Huddleston et al., 2024; Shaoan et al., 2025). Researchers further supported the idea that inflexible instructional timelines limited opportunities for meaningful, individualized instruction, particularly for African American students whose learning outcomes may differ from standardized expectations (Fenuku & Akpaku, 2024; Narayanan et al., 2023). This finding reinforces the importance of instructional environments that are flexible and culturally responsive, enabling teachers to support the holistic development of every student.

Participants in this study stated that autonomy for both teachers and students was a critical factor in closing the achievement gap (see Gay et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023). Instructional autonomy enabled teachers to design culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate learning experiences, while student autonomy supported identity formation, engagement, and skill development. Together, these forms of autonomy create classroom environments that align with the model of developmental competencies and allow African American students to excel academically and grow holistically.

### ***Culturally Relevant Resources***

The findings from this study revealed that eight of the 13 participants believed culturally relevant resources were essential to effectively support the academic and developmental needs of African American students. Eight participants shared that

without access to these resources, they were limited in their ability to present content that reflected students' lived experiences, cultural identities, and historical contributions (see Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022). According to the participants, this disconnect between instructional materials and students' cultural backgrounds often led to disengagement and reduced academic motivation. T7 described how students became less interested and struggled to connect with lessons that did not represent their communities or experiences. These observations were supported by research emphasizing that culturally affirming content helps students feel acknowledged in the classroom and contributes to improved academic outcomes (Cunningham, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Mburu, 2022). These perspectives highlight the importance of ensuring that instructional materials reflect the diverse identities of students to support engagement, connection, and meaningful learning.

Most participants explained that using culturally relevant materials helped students see themselves in the content, which strengthened their participation and encouraged meaningful learning. T5 described modifying their instructional approach to align with both the individual and cultural characteristics of their students, noting that this strategy contributed to stronger student engagement and academic growth. This aligned with the work of Hernandez and Burrows (2021) and Hugh-Pennie et al. (2021), who emphasized that materials that reflect students' identities support deeper classroom engagement and promote achievement among historically marginalized student populations. Five of the 13 participants also shared that culturally relevant content sparked curiosity and increased students' willingness to contribute during class. This

aligned with research indicating that culturally relevant instruction promotes curiosity and encourages active classroom participation by making learning more personally meaningful and affirming (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Gay et al., 2021). These moments of connection not only enhanced learning outcomes but also helped create a classroom environment where students felt seen and respected.

The need for culturally relevant resources also aligned with the framework of Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies in minority children. This model emphasized the importance of learning environments that validate children's cultural experiences and promote their identity development. More than half of the study participants expressed that when resources were not culturally meaningful, African American students often felt excluded from the learning process. These findings are also supported by research showing that the absence of culturally relevant content can lead to disengagement, reduced motivation, and a sense of invisibility in the classroom (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Gay et al., 2021). This exclusion disrupted students' sense of belonging and limited the development of confidence and academic competence. According to the model, development is supported when students interact with environments that affirm who they are culturally, socially, and emotionally (Coll & Lamberty, 1996). Over half of the studies participants believed that the use of culturally appropriate content created space for African American students to feel valued and supported, which in turn contributed to their academic and personal growth.

In addition to supporting classroom instruction, most participants stated that culturally relevant resources were vital in addressing the broader disconnect between

African American students and the curriculum. Culturally relevant resources are vital in addressing the broader disconnect between African American students and the curriculum, as supported by research demonstrating that inclusive materials help bridge gaps in engagement, identity, and achievement (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Gay et al., 2021). Most participants noted that when students were repeatedly exposed to content that did not reflect their history or communities, it contributed to a diminished sense of educational relevance. T7 explained that students should engage with materials that highlighted the achievements and perspectives of people who looked like them and came from similar backgrounds. This aligned with the work of Mehta (2024), who asserted that students must be provided with a curriculum that affirms their cultural backgrounds, identities, experiences, and the contributions of diverse communities in order to experience meaningful academic success. One participant emphasized that without these connections, students were less likely to view school as a place where their identities were valued. Six of the 13 participants reported that the use of culturally relevant resources helped reframe students' perceptions of school by showing them that their stories, interests, and experiences belonged in the classroom.

Almost half of the participants also described the importance of using culturally relevant materials to help students strengthen their cultural identity and develop a sense of belonging. These perspectives were consistent with research that showed when students are exposed to literature, examples, and instructional materials that affirm their background, they are more likely to feel confident and academically capable (Facun-

Granadozo et al., 2023; McAllister and Irvine, 2023; Mensah, 2021; Ober et al., 2023).

This validation was viewed by participants as a critical component of student development. They reported that without access to such resources, it became more difficult to support students in reaching their full potential. Five of 13 participants described how culturally reflective materials encouraged students to express themselves more freely and take ownership, an outcome supported by prior research highlighting the connection between cultural representation and student agency (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022; Gardner-Neblett, 2023; Gay et al., 2021). In classrooms where these materials were used consistently, students demonstrated increased engagement and a stronger connection to the learning process. These experiences reinforced the belief that cultural representation plays an essential role in shaping both student identity and academic confidence.

Overall, most participants in this study clearly articulated that culturally relevant resources were not supplemental, but foundational to supporting the academic and developmental success of African American students (see Gay et al., 2021). Providing teachers with access to instructional materials that reflect students' lived experiences contributed to inclusive classroom environments, greater student participation, and improved learning outcomes. These findings support the view that meaningful representation within the curriculum is a necessary component of educational equity and must be prioritized at every level of instructional planning and policy development (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022). Almost half of the participants consistently emphasized that when students saw their cultural identities reflected in classroom materials, they were

more likely to feel connected to their learning and confident in their academic abilities.

Without access to such resources, teachers felt limited in their capacity to meet the needs of African American students and create learning environments where all students could succeed.

## **Theme 2: Teachers Believe the Achievement Gap is Extensive Due to Unreasonable Expectations**

### ***Academic Achievement Gap***

The findings from this study showed that all participants viewed the achievement gap between African American and White students as persistent and extensive.

Participants described the gap as a widespread academic disparity that had not improved meaningfully over time. These findings reinforced the conclusions of James-Brabham et al. (2023), indicating that racial achievement gaps are evident before kindergarten and often widen as students' progress through school, particularly when systemic inequities remain unaddressed. These outcomes also echoed the conclusions of Garon-Carrier et al. (2024), who stated disparities in early literacy, numeracy, and school readiness contribute to long term academic gaps. T1 reflected that throughout their 29-year career in education, the achievement gap remained consistent and unresolved. Nine participants attributed this challenge to deep-rooted systemic inequities that began in early childhood and continued across grade levels. These inequities included unequal access to high quality early learning experiences, disparities in school funding, and limited culturally affirming instruction (see Boda et al., 2022; Brummelman et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2023; Temple et al., 2022). These insights emphasize the long-standing nature of the

achievement gap and point to the need for early, sustained, and systemic interventions that address disparities from the foundational years of schooling.

Four participants described how the gap was reflected in measurable outcomes such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment. T11 explained that African American students frequently scored lower than their White peers and were less likely to graduate or attend college, which they linked to systemic inequities such as socioeconomic conditions and unequal access to instructional resources. These results were consistent with the findings of Zengilowski et al. (2023) showing that African American students experience unequal access to quality education due to disparities in teaching quality and school resources. Zengilowski et al. also noted that historic and institutional inequities such as underfunding in predominantly African American districts continue to limit academic outcomes and postsecondary opportunities for low-income African American students. These findings highlight how academic disparities are not only observable in classroom settings but also quantifiable through broader educational outcomes, reinforcing the urgency of addressing structural challenges.

Aligned with studies conducted by Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) and Sullivan et al. (2023), most participants expressed that underfunded schools created significant challenges by limiting access to essential instructional resources, materials, and support services. They reported that African American students often attended schools with limited access to books, materials, technology, and instructional supports. T5 emphasized the need for increased funding in inner city schools to provide African American students with high quality learning materials. This need reflected the conclusions of Black and

Crolley (2022), who linked underfunding to limited access to quality instructional materials, inadequate facilities, fewer experienced teachers, lower academic achievement, reduced graduation rates, and diminished postsecondary opportunities for students in underserved communities. This highlights the critical role of equitable school funding in creating learning environments that can better support African American students' academic success.

The findings also aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies, which emphasized the role of the environment, including schools, families, and societal systems, in shaping children's learning and development. According to the model, when environmental supports such as equitable resources are missing, students' development and achievement are limited. Over half of the participants explained that systemic challenges such as biased disciplinary practices, inequitable funding, and the absence of responsive instruction weakened the connection between students' strengths and their learning environments. These findings reaffirmed the assertions made by researchers who found that systemic challenges such as exclusionary discipline practices, underfunded schools, and a lack of culturally and developmentally responsive instruction disrupt students' connections to learning environments and contribute to persistent educational disparities (Sanders, 2024; Weeks & Sullivan, 2024; Zengilowski et al., 2023). These perspectives also illustrate how structural inequities within the educational environment can limit students' developmental potential, especially when instruction and resources fail to reflect and support their lived experiences.

While several participants addressed concerns related to pacing and testing, only T4 explicitly reported that the structure and speed of the curriculum further complicated their ability to address academic challenges. T4 explained that a fast instructional pace and constant standardized testing limited the time available to support students who entered school behind. T4 also noted that even when students were multiple grade levels below expectations, they were still required to move through the same curriculum pacing guide and take the same assessments as their peers. These challenges reflected research that found rigid pacing and test centered instruction often left African American students without the time and support needed to build foundational knowledge (Fenuku & Akpaku, 2024; Narayanan et al., 2023). This highlights the need for instructional models that allow greater flexibility and responsiveness, ensuring that all students, regardless of their starting point, are given adequate time and support to succeed academically.

Standardized assessments can reinforce existing inequities. Two participants described how instruction became centered around test preparation rather than student learning, which reduced time for creativity, deep learning, and the use of culturally affirming teaching methods. Research supported these concerns by showing that high pressure testing environments often narrowed instructional focus, limited differentiation, and overlooked students' individual learning needs (Göloğlu Demir & Kaplan Keleş, 2021; Hemmler et al., 2023). T4 observed that some students passed standardized tests by using test taking strategies, but continued to struggle in class, revealing that the test results did not reflect true mastery or close the achievement gap.

The structure of curriculum and assessment also affected how participants could respond to students' cultural and developmental needs. Four participants shared those rigid curricular expectations limited their ability to integrate culturally responsive practices into instruction. They reported that they were often expected to meet pacing and testing requirements, even when it meant that students did not fully understand the material or have access to learning experiences that aligned with their backgrounds. These observations are aligned with literature calling for instructional flexibility and greater use of culturally relevant materials to support students' needs (Couch et al., 2021; Grecu, 2022; Hernandez & Burrows, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2019). These findings emphasize the need for instructional approaches that allow teachers to adapt content in ways that affirm students' cultural identities while supporting their academic development.

Most study participants made it clear that the achievement gap between African American and White students reflected extensive challenges that required systemic attention. These findings support the idea that long standing educational inequalities must be addressed by reforming structures that limit students' developmental growth, restrict teachers' instructional practices, and fail to provide schools with the resources necessary to meet all students' needs (Simeonova, 2023). The findings from this study also affirmed the conclusions of Francis and Weller (2022), who revealed that meaningful change will require early intervention, sustained investment in culturally responsive resources, and instructional models that are responsive to the diverse needs of learners. Without

addressing these structural challenges, the conditions that sustain the achievement gap are likely to persist.

### ***Students' Foundational Skills***

The findings of this study revealed that many participants encountered significant challenges in supporting African American students who entered school without foundational academic skills. Half of the participants described these skills, such as letter recognition, number sense, and vocabulary knowledge, as essential for early academic success. These findings align with the conclusions of researchers who emphasized the importance of foundational literacy and numeracy skills in promoting long-term academic achievement (Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2020; Temple et al., 2022). T6 reported that many African American students began school without these abilities, making it difficult to keep pace with grade level expectations. Nine of the 13 participants explained that the absence of these skills contributed to persistent differences in achievement between African American and White students, which often widened as students progressed through school. This finding substantiated the conclusions of Brummelman et al. (2024), who argued that early academic disadvantages tend to compound over time, leading to widening achievement gaps as students advance through school. These findings emphasize the importance of early academic readiness and highlight how initial skill deficits can contribute to long-term gaps in achievement.

Six participants identified several factors that contributed to this academic disadvantage. These included limited access to high quality preschool education, fewer

early literacy opportunities in the home, and disparities in socioeconomic conditions. One participant noted that African American students often had less access to language-rich environments and educational support before entering formal schooling, which created early learning gaps (see Cook et al., 2021; Matheny et al., 2023; NASEM, 2019; NCES, 2020). T3 emphasized that without early exposure to reading and numeracy, students struggled to build the foundation needed for future success. These findings were consistent with the research of Gardner-Neblett (2023), who emphasized that early literacy and numeracy development is essential for later academic achievement, particularly among children from historically marginalized communities. Six participants also discussed how systemic factors, such as underfunded schools and unequal access to instructional resources, made it difficult for students to overcome these early challenges. This conclusion was supported by Hecht et al. (2023), who found that socioeconomic challenges and school underfunding negatively influence students' early learning opportunities and long-term outcomes. This highlights the need for expanded access to high quality early learning opportunities and equitable resource allocation to help mitigate the effects of early academic achievement gaps. Quinn et al. (2020) confirmed that unequal access to early childhood resources contributes to enduring gaps in academic performance between racial groups, reinforcing the need for equity-driven reform.

Eight participants also stated that many African American students entered school with limited real-world experiences, which further contributed to differences in academic readiness. They explained that these students often lacked exposure to experiences outside their immediate neighborhoods, such as family travel, visits to museums,

extracurricular programs, or other community-based learning opportunities. T9 observed that African American students were less likely to engage in conversations or make connections to lessons that assumed prior knowledge from such experiences. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Robinson (2020), who found that structural inequalities, such as challenges in school funding, access to quality early education, and community resources, limit access to enrichment experiences that promote school readiness and academic growth. One participant emphasized that this was not due to a lack of ability, but rather the result of unequal access to enrichment activities shaped by structural, economic, and social conditions (see McBride, 2023; Skopek & Passaretta, 2021). These observations reinforce the idea that educational readiness is shaped not only by academic instruction but also by access to broader learning experiences outside of school.

Four study participants explained that a lack of real-world experiences influenced how students engaged with instruction and approached academic content. They stated that background knowledge formed through hands-on learning, travel, and diverse interactions helped students develop comprehension, problem solving, and reasoning skills (see Robinson, 2020; Temple et al., 2022). These findings were consistent with those of Gualtieri and Finn (2022), who emphasized the role of experiential learning in supporting cognitive development and classroom engagement. Without these experiences, students found it more difficult to understand unfamiliar concepts or participate in class discussions, especially when lessons assumed exposure to particular topics or environments. According to the NCES (2021), children from under-resourced

communities were less likely to have access to these learning experiences prior to entering school. Four of 13 participants shared that this lack of exposure affected students' motivation and interest in school, as many were unable to relate new knowledge to their own lives. This finding reflected the work of Gardner-Neblett (2023), who noted that limited background knowledge reduces students' ability to meaningfully engage with academic content. These study findings point to the importance of integrating relatable content and experiential learning into instruction to increase engagement and support deeper understanding for all students.

These findings aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies, which emphasized that children's growth was shaped by the environments they interacted with, including home, school, and community. According to the model, when students had limited access to rich and supportive environments early in life, their ability to develop academic and social competencies could be restricted. Two participants described the need to create classrooms that supported the development of students whose early learning contexts may not have included broad or structured learning opportunities. They stated that these classrooms should integrate lessons that are both meaningful and culturally relevant to students' lives.

T9 shared that instruction should be immersive and designed to engage students in experiences that broaden their understanding. Most of the participants agreed that culturally connected and experiential learning supported students by helping them apply academic knowledge to their own experiences. Research supported this idea by showing that CRT improved academic outcomes by validating students' backgrounds and making

learning more engaging (Ladson-Billings, 2019; Pevec-Zimmer et al., 2024). Additional research noted that learning activities such as role play, simulation, and real-world inquiry gave students opportunities to build critical thinking and practical skills (Kong, 2021; Ranken et al., 2024). Krajcik et al. (2022) concluded that schools offering project-based and play-based learning created more equitable and engaging learning conditions for historically marginalized students.

One participant also highlighted the role of school resources in either limiting or supporting early learning. T11 described the struggle to secure basic materials for students, such as books or classroom supplies. Six participants explained that schools serving African American students frequently lacked funding to provide enriched learning environments. These limitations were especially concerning when students entered school without strong foundational skills or prior knowledge. Researchers have shown that unequal access to school materials, technology, and instructional supports contributes to differences in academic achievement across racial and socioeconomic lines (Francis & Weller, 2022; Moritz et al., 2023). These findings illustrate how disparities in school funding and resources can further disadvantage students who are already at risk, making it more difficult to close early learning gaps.

Six of 13 participants clearly expressed that African American students' academic challenges were often rooted in systemic inequities that limited access to early skills and experiences (see Robinson, 2020). Addressing these gaps require classroom practices, school structures, and educational systems that are responsive to students' lived experiences and position them for long term academic success (see Boutte & Compton-

Lilly, 2022; Gay et al., 2021). Creating equitable learning environments means ensuring students have access to both academic readiness opportunities and enriching real-world experiences that support cognitive and social development. According to Gardner-Neblett (2023), these efforts must begin early and be sustained throughout schooling to prevent initial disparities from becoming long-term obstacles to achievement.

### *Socioeconomics*

The findings from this study indicated that six participants believed students' socioeconomic status contributed significantly to the achievement gap between African American and White students. Six of 13 participants described how African American students often entered school with fewer resources, limited access to early learning opportunities, and reduced exposure to enriching academic environments. These findings built upon the conclusions of Francis and Weller (2022), who stated that disparities in access to early learning and home resources placed students from low-income communities at an academic disadvantage. These inequities, according to participants, placed African American students at a disadvantage before formal schooling began and continued to affect their academic development throughout their educational experience (see Henry et al., 2020; Temple et al., 2022). Six study participants explained that students from low-income families often lacked access to high quality preschool programs, educational materials, technology, and extracurricular enrichment. T11 shared their experience managing classrooms with insufficient resources, noting, "it's hard to get a hold of things that these students need ... we don't have enough textbooks for everyone." These findings mirrored those of Moritz et al. (2023), who reported that many

schools serving African American communities were underfunded and unequipped to meet the needs of their students. These findings were also consistent with research showing that socioeconomic challenges influence school readiness and academic performance (Hecht et al., 2023). Ultimately, these findings emphasize the critical need for equitable resource distribution to ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to the tools and opportunities necessary for academic success.

Most participants described how systemic inequality in school funding contributed to ongoing differences in educational outcomes. These findings align with the conclusions of Ajiga et al. (2025), who claimed that school underfunding in historically marginalized communities severely restricts student achievement and long-term success. T5 explained that schools in more affluent, predominantly White areas often had better funding and access to high quality instructional materials, while schools in historically marginalized communities served African American students with limited or outdated resources. These disparities affected not only the availability of materials but also the types of learning experiences students were exposed to. These findings validated the work of Hecht et al. (2023), who emphasized that unequal school funding results in limited academic exposure and hinders foundational skill development. Five of 13 participants emphasized that without access to developmentally appropriate tools and materials, African American students had fewer opportunities to build foundational skills critical for academic achievement. These findings paralleled those reported by Moritz et

al. (2023), who noted that students in underfunded schools are frequently deprived of essential learning experiences that promote early academic success.

These findings also aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies, which emphasized the significance of environmental contexts, including social, economic, and educational conditions, in shaping student learning and development. According to the model, children's competencies are not solely shaped by individual characteristics, but by the degree to which their environments support learning and growth. Six participants asserted that many of the academic challenges experienced by African American students were the result of systemic challenges rather than student deficiencies. Coll and Lamberty argued that disparities in opportunity limit children's exposure to the types of learning environments that support competence, particularly in communities with fewer financial and material resources.

Most of the study participants described how systemic inequities influenced more than access to instructional tools. They reported that students in under-resourced schools often lacked access to early intervention programs, enrichment experiences, and individualized academic support (see Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023). These limitations, participants explained, contributed to lower levels of school readiness and reduced academic confidence. These results were consistent with the findings of Hecht et al. (2023), who concluded that academic support programs are often absent in low-income schools, contributing to long-term gaps in achievement. Five participants believed that these challenges led to a cycle in which African American students were expected to meet the same academic benchmarks as

their peers, but with fewer supports in place to help them succeed. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Francis and Weller (2022), who affirmed that students in low-resource schools are often held to the same standards despite a lack of equitable academic preparation.

Six of the 13 participants emphasized that African American students' educational experiences were shaped by structural inequalities that limited access to resources and learning opportunities. Most participants explained that addressing these challenges required more than classroom level solutions. Instead, these participants called for systemic changes that prioritized the redistribution of educational resources and recognized the importance of students' socioeconomic realities in shaping academic outcomes (see Gay et al., 2021; Robinson, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023). All of the study participants believed that when schools acknowledged these factors and committed to building supportive, well-resourced learning environments, African American students would be better positioned to succeed and reach their full academic potential. These findings also built upon the conclusions of Ajiga et al. (2025), who emphasized the need for educational equity to address longstanding resource gaps and promote student achievement.

### **Theme 3: Teachers Recommend Strategies That Help African American Students Succeed**

#### ***Individualizing Instruction***

The findings from this study revealed that twelve participants believed individualized and differentiated instruction were essential strategies for supporting the

academic success of African American students. These findings confirmed earlier research conducted by Lawson (2021), who described how personalizing instruction based on students' strengths, interests, and academic needs make learning more meaningful and accessible. T5 reported that when they used individualized instruction, students became more engaged and showed academic growth. Most participants stated that responding to students' individual learning needs helped them identify gaps early, build on existing skills, and promote confidence in the classroom. These findings affirmed the conclusions of Pozas et al. (2021) and Unal et al. (2022), who emphasized that differentiated instruction promotes inclusive environments by addressing diverse academic and cultural needs. Additionally, Gunawardena et al. (2024) supported these perspectives by highlighting that adaptive instructional strategies empower teachers to meet students where they are developmentally, enhancing both engagement and achievement. Fasco et al. (2024) also emphasized the role of individualized instruction in supporting academic equity, particularly for students whose backgrounds may not align with traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches. These findings highlight the value of instructional approaches that recognize and respond to students' unique learning needs, ultimately supporting stronger engagement and academic achievement.

Most participants described using assessment data as a practical method for individualizing instruction. T1 explained that they used data to drive instructional decisions, whereas T3 shared that they regularly analyzed assessment results to identify missing knowledge and provide targeted support. This approach allowed participants to adjust instruction in ways that aligned with students' developmental readiness, academic

backgrounds, and learning goals. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Karvonen et al. (2024), who found that data-informed instructional practices improved lesson effectiveness by allowing teachers to adapt strategies based on students' specific learning needs. In addition, Ismail et al. (2022) reported that targeted use of assessment data enabled teachers to recognize student challenges and deliver support that directly addressed academic gaps, reinforcing the instructional methods used by participants in this study. Over half of the study participants believed that using student data not only improved lesson effectiveness but also created an inclusive environment where African American students could succeed academically and see their growth over time. This perspective confirmed the research of Ajiga et al. (2025), who emphasized that when teachers use assessment data to inform instruction, they promote more equitable academic outcomes for marginalized learners. Varier and Yun (2023) further supported this view, highlighting that culturally responsive data practices promote inclusivity by affirming students' identities and academic progress, which closely mirrors how participants in this study used data to guide culturally relevant and individualized instruction.

These findings also aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies, which emphasized that student development occurs through interactions with responsive and supportive environments. Four participants reported that African American students benefitted from learning environments where instruction was responsive to their academic needs and cultural identities. These participants emphasized the importance of adapting instruction to reflect students' lived

experiences, strengths, and interests. These findings built upon the conclusions of Coll and Lamberty who also emphasized that students' academic and developmental growth is shaped by environments that recognize and nurture their individual and cultural experiences. When instruction reflects and supports these dimensions, it strengthens students' engagement and supports the development of essential competencies. Nine participants believed that individualized instruction helped students feel seen and understood, which increased their motivation and willingness to engage in the learning process. These findings reinforced what was previously reported by Chen and Perez (2023), who found that when instruction was adapted to meet students' individual learning needs, students demonstrated greater motivation, engagement, and persistence in their academic tasks. T10 noted that when instruction matched students' interests and needs, they became more invested in their learning and gained confidence. Most participants believed that personalized learning gave students a sense of ownership, which contributed to their academic progress. These views aligned with research concluding that personalized, student-centered instruction creates greater ownership, participation, and skill development, particularly when students engage with content that reflects their pace, interests, and lived experiences (Am et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate that personalized learning approaches, when grounded in students' cultural and academic needs can promote greater motivation, engagement, and ownership over the learning process.

More than half of the study participants also described differentiated instruction as a method for accommodating the wide range of learning styles, abilities, and cultural

backgrounds present in their classrooms. They explained that by modifying materials, instructional methods, and classroom activities, they were able to support students who required additional practice, alternative representations of content, or more time to learn key concepts. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Pozas et al. (2021), who supported the use of differentiated instruction as an effective method for accommodating diverse learning styles, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Unal et al. (2022) also found that teachers recognized the value of differentiated instruction in addressing the varied academic and cultural needs of students, despite reporting challenges such as limited training and resources for implementation. Six participants noted that African American students often entered the classroom with varied levels of academic readiness and life experiences. These six participants also emphasized that differentiated instruction allowed them to provide meaningful support that reflected each student's learning. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Gunawardena et al. (2024), who emphasized that differentiated instruction enables teachers to respond effectively to students' varied academic backgrounds and readiness levels, supporting more inclusive and equitable learning outcomes. These results were also consistent with the findings of Hughey (2020), who reported that designing instruction to students' life experiences and learning profiles promotes deeper engagement and promotes meaningful academic growth. These findings also reinforced what was previously reported by Ober et al. (2023), whose research demonstrated that differentiated strategies grounded in student context and readiness help connect instructional gaps and promote achievement among diverse learners. Together, these insights illustrate how participants viewed differentiated

instruction as a means of acknowledging students' varied experiences and academic readiness, and as a strategy for responding more thoughtfully to the learning needs of African American students.

Study findings also aligned with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) framework, which emphasized that students thrive in environments where their strengths and challenges are understood and addressed through developmentally responsive instruction. Most participants believed that when lessons were designed with students' cultural and academic experiences in mind, students were more likely to feel capable, connected, and prepared to succeed. Participants T1, T4, T6, T9, and T12 expressed that individualized instruction promoted the development of essential competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, and academic perseverance. Six participants described how student-centered approaches helped African American students take a more active role in their learning, increasing their ability to monitor their progress and engage with content at a deeper level. Research conducted by Dumont and Ready (2023), supported this view by finding that when students are given opportunities to pursue learning that reflects their goals and identities, they are more likely to achieve academic success. These findings indicate that when instructional strategies are both culturally and developmentally responsive, students are better positioned to build confidence, skills, and persistence needed to succeed academically.

Most of the participants consistently stated that meeting the needs of African American students required more than generalized approaches to teaching. These participants believed that individualized and differentiated instruction created meaningful

pathways for success by providing responsive, culturally aware, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. Overall, participants described individualized and differentiated instruction as strategies they used to respond to the cultural, academic, and developmental needs of African American students. Their perspectives suggested that such approaches supported students' engagement, skill development, and confidence over time.

### *Student Engagement*

The findings from this study indicated that six of 13 participants viewed student engagement as a key strategy for promoting academic success among African American students. These participants described engagement not only as a behavioral response to instruction, but as a reflection of how well students saw themselves and their experiences represented in the classroom. They stated that when African American students did not feel connected to the curriculum or classroom materials, their interest and participation often declined. T7 noted that the books and lessons used in their classroom frequently referenced places and topics unfamiliar to their students, which created a disconnect and decreased student interest. These results were consistent with the findings of Ober et al. (2023), whose research demonstrated that student engagement increased when instruction was personalized and reflected students' backgrounds and life experiences. These findings also corroborated the assertions made by Franco et al. (2023), that culturally affirming environments strengthen student involvement and reduce disengagement, especially for students from historically marginalized groups.

Participants T3, T5, T10, and T12 emphasized that culturally relevant instruction increased student engagement by making lessons more meaningful, relatable, and affirming. They reported that when students recognized their cultural identities, histories, and lived experiences within the content, they were more likely to be attentive, curious, and confident. These findings aligned with research by Franco et al. (2023), who found that CRT strategies significantly enhanced student engagement, especially among African American learners. These results were also consistent with the findings of Ober et al. (2023), who noted that learning experiences grounded in students' cultural contexts promoted stronger academic motivation and participation. These perspectives highlight how culturally relevant instruction can support the development of classroom environments where students feel connected to the content and more actively engaged in their learning.

Twelve participants believed that increasing engagement through culturally relevant education was especially important for African American students, who often experienced a disconnect between their home lives and classroom expectations. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Abacioglu et al. (2023), who found that multicultural education practices enhanced student engagement by promoting positive classroom relationships and validating students' cultural identities. Nine participants explained that when lessons included African American stories, perspectives, and contributions, students were more likely to feel valued and take pride in their learning. These results were consistent with the findings of Eden et al. (2024), who reported that when students saw their cultural and linguistic backgrounds reflected in the curriculum, it

strengthened their sense of belonging and encouraged greater academic participation. These perspectives were also consistent with research highlighting the importance of inclusive curriculum in promoting motivation and reducing academic disengagement (Lawson, 2021; Malone et al., 2023). By bridging the gap between students' cultural experiences and academic expectations, culturally inclusive lessons may support the development of identity, purpose, and academic commitment.

These findings also reflected Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model of developmental competencies, which emphasized that a student's development is shaped by how well their environments support and respond to their cultural and individual needs. According to the model, engagement is not merely a product of student effort, but the result of meaningful interactions with an environment that affirms the student's identity. Most participants indicated that when African American students were provided with instruction that reflected their experiences and culture, they felt more connected to the classroom and more willing to participate actively in the learning process. Only one participant stated that the use of culturally relevant materials increased motivation and contributed to stronger learning outcomes. They described how integrating African American history, literature, and cultural practices into lessons helped students build confidence, take academic risks, and engage with content at a deeper level. T7 emphasized that culturally relevant materials allowed students to see themselves in the curriculum, which enhanced their interest and encouraged sustained participation. These findings also aligned with Coll and Lamberty's view that culturally affirming

environments promote motivation and cognitive engagement by validating students' lived experiences.

Twelve participants also reported that engagement strategies rooted in cultural relevance helped close the achievement gap between African American and White students. They believed that when students were given opportunities to connect learning with their own identities, their sense of belonging and purpose in the classroom increased. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Eden et al. (2024), who emphasized that culturally responsive curricula promote belonging and engagement by reflecting students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This connection promoted academic growth by supporting the development of essential competencies such as critical thinking, perseverance, and motivation. These results were consistent with the findings of Dyches et al. (2022), who found that integrating students' cultural identities into instruction enhances motivation and engagement, leading to stronger academic performance. These findings also affirmed the conclusions of Mburu (2022), who reported that CRT supports student perseverance and critical thinking, which are key to closing long-standing academic gaps. These findings suggest that culturally relevant engagement strategies may support stronger academic outcomes while contributing to classroom environments where African American students feel more empowered to succeed.

Two participants in this study expressed that student engagement, particularly when rooted in cultural relevance, was essential for African American students to thrive in school. They described how engaged students demonstrated greater academic

confidence and stronger learning outcomes, especially when classroom instruction acknowledged their cultural experiences. These findings reinforced the importance of creating learning environments that reflect, support, and respond to the identities of all students as a strategy for promoting equity and academic achievement (Anyichie & Butler, 2023; Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023). One participant explained that when students saw their cultures and experiences meaningfully reflected in instruction, they were more likely to develop a sense of purpose and remain actively involved in the learning process. These findings confirmed earlier research conducted by Anyichie and Butler (2023), who reported that culturally responsive instruction increased student motivation by making learning experiences more personally relevant and engaging for culturally diverse learners. Eleven participants emphasized that promoting engagement in this way helped close opportunity gaps and supported more consistent academic progress over time. These outcomes echoed the conclusions of Facun-Granadozo et al. (2023), who found that culturally responsive instructional strategies were instrumental in promoting classroom engagement and academic success among African American students.

### ***Building Relationships to Support African American Student Success***

The findings from this study revealed that a total of 11 participants believed strong, trusting relationships were foundational to the academic success of African American students. Nine participants described how meaningful relationships supported students' emotional well-being, academic confidence, and classroom engagement. T1 emphasized that students responded more positively when they felt genuinely cared for,

which resulted in increased effort and participation. These results aligned with the findings of Li et al. (2022), who found that relational trust and teacher care increased motivation and participation in culturally diverse classrooms. Six participants shared that by getting to know students on a personal level, they were able to better understand their strengths, needs, and cultural backgrounds. This perspective echoed the conclusions of Monteiro et al. (2021), who emphasized the value of culturally aware relationship-building in supporting student inclusion and connection. These insights allowed participants to develop instruction that connected with students' lived experiences and encouraged a sense of belonging. The model of developmental competencies in minority children emphasized that children's growth is shaped by the quality of their relationships and the resources available in their learning environments (Coll & Lamberty, 1996). These findings also mirrored those of Geven et al. (2021) and Wang (2023), who demonstrated that emotionally supportive classroom climates promote academic resilience and reduce disengagement among marginalized learners. Nine participants believed that building relationships with African American students helped establish a classroom climate that supported academic success and personal development. These findings reinforced what was previously reported by Facun-Granadozo et al. (2023), who noted that culturally responsive instruction grounded in strong student-teacher relationships helped support academic growth and affirm students' identities. Most participants' reflections highlighted the role relationships played in shaping how they connected with students, supported their development, and created responsive learning environments.

Three participants also shared that relationships helped them respond more effectively to the challenges African American students often faced in academic settings. These findings affirmed the conclusions of Kim et al. (2023), who found that strong student-teacher relationships created emotional safety and trust, particularly for students navigating systemic inequities. T9 explained that understanding students' personal circumstances allowed them to support students more holistically before focusing solely on academic goals. Four participants noted that African American students frequently encountered systemic challenges and negative stereotypes that affected their confidence and sense of belonging in school. These outcomes echoed the conclusions of Steed and Kranski (2022), who reported that responsive teacher relationships helped promote belonging and connection for students who regularly experienced marginalization in school settings. Strong relationships helped counteract these experiences by building trust and creating a safe environment for learning.

Eleven of 13 participants suggested that strong relationships contributed to building trust and creating environments where students felt emotionally safe and supported in their learning. These findings also reflected Coll and Lamberty's (1996) emphasis on the importance of responsive and inclusive environments in supporting the development of competencies in minority children. Seven participants viewed the teacher-student relationship as a protective factor that provided emotional safety, reduced anxiety, and helped students remain engaged despite external challenges (see Leverett et al., 2022). Through intentional relationship building, participants supported students both academically and emotionally.

Six of the 13 participants described relationship building not as an isolated strategy, but as a central part of effective teaching. They explained that when students felt respected and valued, they were more likely to take ownership of their learning and participate actively in class (see Wang, 2023). Nine of the 13 participants also shared that forming connections allowed them to learn more about students' cultural identities, interests, and experiences, which informed their instructional planning. These findings were consistent with the conclusions of Hernandez and Burrows (2021), who found that building relationships with students helped teachers better understand students' cultural backgrounds, allowing them to incorporate culturally meaningful content that improved classroom engagement and instructional effectiveness. These findings also aligned with the work of Hugh-Pennie et al. (2021), who emphasized that when teachers acknowledge and incorporate students' cultural identities into instructional planning, they are more likely to promote academic excellence and support cultural competence among diverse learners. Mensah (2021) emphasized that culturally responsive pedagogy enhances engagement by incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into instruction and creating meaningful teacher–student relationships. These findings were echoed when T1 noted that relationship-based teaching encouraged consistent engagement, especially when instruction reflected what mattered to students. These findings aligned with research that supported the use of CRT to strengthen classroom relationships and student outcomes. Similarly, Mburu (2022) found that when teachers connect academic content to students' lived experiences, it creates more engaging and supportive learning environments that promote stronger relationships and improved outcomes. Participants T5, T7, and T12

believed that students learned best when instruction was both academically meaningful and personally relevant. Coll and Lamberty's (1996) model supported this finding by highlighting the value of learning environments that acknowledged and responded to each child's social and cultural context.

Participants T1, T5, T6, T7, and T10 emphasized that when relationships were established, classrooms became spaces where African American students felt emotionally safe and academically supported. These findings aligned with the conclusions of Leverett et al. (2022), who emphasized that relationship-building in early childhood settings contributed to both emotional well-being and academic success by promoting equitable learning conditions. Only one participant emphasized that encouraging open dialogue and valuing diverse viewpoints helped students feel seen and respected in their learning communities. These results were consistent with the findings of Thornberg et al. (2022), who found that emotionally secure and respectful classroom environments increased students' participation and academic achievement, especially for students experiencing marginalization. These environments supported student confidence, academic curiosity, and the development of social competencies. Most participants stated that consistent relationship building contributed to student growth by reinforcing their sense of belonging and ability to succeed. According to the model of developmental competencies, such environments are essential for students' academic and social development (Coll & Lamberty, 1996). These outcomes echoed the conclusions of Eden et al. (2024), who found that culturally affirming teacher–student relationships enhanced student engagement and supported long-term academic development among African

American students. Most participants also explained that strong relationships increased student engagement, which contributed to closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. These findings reinforced what was previously reported by Allen (2021), who concluded that affirming student-teacher relationships improved both motivation and engagement for Black students. These findings highlight the importance of intentional relationship building in supporting African American students within culturally diverse early childhood classrooms.

Seven participants in this study expressed that strong student-teacher relationships were critical to African American students' academic success. These relationships helped students feel valued, understood, and supported, which led to increased participation and achievement. Grounded in Coll and Lambert's (1996) model, the findings emphasized the importance of responsive and inclusive classrooms where students' identities are acknowledged, and their growth is supported through meaningful interactions. Seven participants viewed relationship building as a strategy that not only supported learning but created equitable pathways for African American students to thrive in school (see Allen, 2021; Göktaş & Kaya, 2023; NAEYC, n.d.-a; Thornberg et al., 2022). These connections also empowered participants to respond to students with greater empathy, insight, and instructional relevance. As a result, two participants explained their classrooms became spaces where both academic progress and emotional development were actively nurtured. These perspectives illustrated how student-teacher relationships were viewed by participants as an essential part of the overall learning environment, influencing both instructional practices and student connection.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I conducted this study with certain limitations. One limitation was the extent to which the findings could be applied to larger populations or different settings. Qualitative research focuses on specific cases; therefore, the results may not be broadly applicable (Mwita, 2022; Oplatka, 2021). According to Mwita (2022), the reliability of qualitative findings may be influenced by the interpretive nature of data analysis. The absence of standardized procedures and the reliance on researcher judgment can also introduce inconsistencies in analysis, potentially affecting the dependability of the results (Mwita, 2022). The minimal use of statistical measures in basic qualitative research limits opportunities for numerical comparisons, making it more challenging to confirm findings through repeated studies (Oplatka, 2021).

This study also had limitations related to sample size, researcher bias, and the sensitive nature of the subject. The 13 participants, all early childhood teachers in Grades 1–3 with at least 1 year of experience, were recruited from the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood teachers' social media communities, and through snowball sampling. Data collection continued until no new information emerged and data saturation was reached. Mwita (2022) asserted that data saturation is the place where the information gathered is sufficient to support the development of well-founded conclusions based on repeated patterns. Although the small sample size limited the study's transferability, it emphasized the depth and quality of information over quantity (see Roberts, 2020).

A third limitation was researcher bias, given that I share the cultural background of the students examined in this study. This commonality posed a possible limitation, because it could have introduced bias into my analysis, data collection, and interpretation. My connection with the students could have influenced my views or led to indifference regarding teachers' perspectives on strategies related to the achievement gap among African American students. I made a conscious effort to prevent my personal opinions from affecting the study. I maintained a reflective journal to document and address any potential biases, feelings, or personal opinions that emerged during the research process. To address this challenge, a reflective process was used that involved ongoing attention to personal perspectives and potential bias (see Ide & Beddoe, 2024). This process supported careful consideration of how personal viewpoints could influence the analysis and helped promote an interpretation of the participants' responses that remained grounded in the data.

Another limitation was the possibility that participants might not have felt entirely comfortable being fully open about their perspectives. Given the sensitivity of the topic, some early childhood educators might have been hesitant to share their opinions and insights. Throughout the interview process, I focused on building trust and rapport with the participants, creating an environment of trust and safety. This approach made participants more likely to communicate openly, as they felt at ease and confident that their privacy was protected. All participants were assured they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any consequences. I used open-ended questions rather than closed-ended ones to encourage participants to express their

thoughts and feelings more freely (Laban, 2024). I also emphasized the value of their input.

### **Recommendations**

Results of this study may add to the research regarding closing the African American academic achievement gap. Based on the participants' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American and White students in Grades 1–3, I recommend additional research to examine the particular types of classroom support that would enable teachers to address challenges, and teacher needs effectively. Further research could explore evidence-based instructional strategies, CRT practices, and social-emotional learning supports that specifically benefit African American students. Additionally, further studies could also examine the impact of small-group interventions, differentiated instruction, and the integration of African American cultural perspectives into the curriculum.

The study participants identified how the lack of parental involvement, including parent education, affects the academic achievement of African American students. I recommend additional research to examine how to improve parental involvement to help teachers to meet the challenges of closing the academic achievement gap. The literature has indicated that the academic success and achievement of early childhood students is affected by parental involvement (Gay et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2021). Teacher participants asserted that parental involvement is vital in helping students strengthen essential skills, build confidence, and sustain academic growth. Further research is required to identify the most effective and beneficial parent education programs and to

explore strategies for better engaging parents in ways that create partnerships and provide support, ultimately helping to close the academic achievement gap between African American and White students.

Participants in this study emphasized the importance of incorporating real-world experiences and culturally relevant instructional materials into early childhood education to help address the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. African American students often begin school without the same level of exposure to diverse experiences and resources that reflect their cultural backgrounds, which may affect their engagement and academic performance (Cook et al., 2021; Gay et al., 2021). Based on participant input, further research is recommended to explore educational programs that intentionally integrate curricula reflecting the culture and lived experiences of African American students. These efforts might include field trips to culturally significant sites, the use of literature and instructional materials that highlight African American history and contributions, and opportunities for students to engage in hands-on, community-based projects.

One promising strategy for addressing disparities in academic achievement is CRT, which involves incorporating students' cultural and contextual backgrounds into instructional practices. Research has shown that this approach can improve academic engagement and outcomes among African American students by affirming their identities and promoting a more inclusive learning environment (Dyches, 2022; Franco et al. 2023; Hammond, 2021). According to Anyichie and Butler (2023) and Pevec-Zimmer et al. (2024), when the learning environment is made more relevant and relatable, students are

more likely to form deeper connections to the material, which can enhance motivation and support overall academic development. These practices contribute to closing the achievement gap by creating learning experiences that are meaningful and engaging for African American students.

Participants also stated that they need more opportunities to observe their peers to improve their teaching strategies, particularly when working with African American students. Observing other teachers allows teachers to see effective, CRT practices in action, offering practical examples of how to engage students, differentiate instruction, and incorporate culturally relevant materials (Woodcock et al., 2023). Participants shared that they are often given directives from district, administration, and policymakers about the implementation of curriculum, policies, procedures, and instructional practices, but are rarely shown how. Observational opportunities amongst teachers promote professional collaboration, where teachers can discuss challenges, share strategies, and refine their approaches to better meet the diverse needs of African American students (Corcelles-Seuba et al., 2024; Miquel et al., 2024). When teachers have the chance to observe these strategies being implemented, they gain valuable insights into how to create learning environments that resonate with their students' cultural backgrounds and experiences (Ma et al., 2024; Mehta, 2024; Naz et al., 2024; Ober et al., 2023). Providing teachers with more opportunities to observe their peers' use of CRT aligns with Coll and Lamberty's (1996) emphasis on creating responsive, culturally aligned environments that support the academic and developmental success of minority children. These observations create a collaborative approach to professional growth, helping teachers

adopt strategies that holistically support the academic achievement of African American students.

Participants expressed the need for more specific professional development on CRT to better support African American students and help close the achievement gap. Investigating the role of professional development and mentorship programs for early childhood teachers may also provide insight into how teachers can effectively address the diverse needs of their students. Teachers noted that understanding and integrating African American students' cultural backgrounds into classroom practices could make learning more relevant and effective for these students. The study findings indicate a need to provide early childhood teachers with regular, hands-on training in CRT strategies. Culturally responsive professional development should be ongoing and accessible, providing teachers with tools to build a more inclusive classroom environment (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024; Dyches et al., 2022; Mburu, 2022). By focusing on CRT, teachers may better support the academic success of African American students, helping to bridge gaps in achievement (Cunningham, 2021; Hernandez & Burrows, 2021; Hugh-Pennie et al., 2021; Mburu, 2022; Mensah, 2021; Ober et al., 2023). Future research should prioritize reassessing and revising current professional development centered around CRT to ensure that it meets the practical needs of teachers and addresses the specific challenges encountered by African American students. This includes developing training that provides actionable strategies for engaging African American students, addressing implicit biases, and encouraging inclusive classroom environments. Revisiting professional development in this way could enhance teachers' ability to connect with

African American students, thereby helping to reduce the academic achievement gap and support equitable learning outcomes (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; Hernandez & Burrows, 2021; McAllister & Irvine, 2023; Tanese, 2020). Future research may also explore how teachers' understanding of CRT influences their ability to create inclusive learning environments that validate and affirm students' diverse backgrounds (Naz et al., 2024). Studies could examine how incorporating students' cultural experiences into instruction contributes to a greater sense of belonging and academic engagement, particularly for African American students (Facun-Granadozo et al., 2023; Robinson, 2020). Additional investigation is warranted into the potential consequences of non-inclusive learning environments, including student disengagement, decreased motivation, and lower self-esteem, which may contribute to widening academic disparities (Malone et al., 2023). Research focused on these areas could offer practical guidance on how CRT might be used to promote equity, strengthen teacher–student relationships, and support improved outcomes for all learners.

### **Implications**

The results of this study include several implications for positive social change, regarding the perspectives of early childhood teachers' challenges of closing the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers. The implications of the current study can be explored across multiple levels, including individual classroom practices, school and district-wide initiatives, broader societal influences on education, and the development or revision of educational policies. Implications at the individual level demonstrate the critical need to adopt instructional

approaches that are intentionally designed to support the academic development of African American students. By prioritizing instructional approaches that are intentionally designed to support the academic achievement of African American students, teachers can address disparities in learning outcomes, create greater student engagement, and create classroom environments where students' identities are affirmed and promote high levels of academic success (Hammond, 2021). The study's findings highlight the critical importance of implementing CRT strategies that incorporate students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and perspectives into daily instruction. These findings are supported by Pevec-Zimmer et al. (2024), who asserted that implementing CRT practices could contribute to improved engagement by making learning more relevant and accessible to students from diverse backgrounds. Dyches (2022) further emphasized that instruction grounded in students' lived experiences helps support stronger emotional connections to learning. When students feel seen and represented in the curriculum, their academic confidence and participation increase, an effect also noted by Franco et al. (2023), who found that CRT can boost motivation and classroom engagement. As Lawson (2021) reported, acknowledging students' cultural identities in instruction contributes to more inclusive learning spaces, where all students are given the opportunity to thrive. Hernandez and Burrows (2021) highlighted that CRT reduces marginalization by validating students' experiences and supporting identity development, which aligns with participants' calls for more culturally grounded classroom practices. Mburu (2022) supported this by noting that culturally inclusive instruction not only promotes equity but also enhances the teacher–student relationship, a key factor in

academic achievement. These strategies also support long-term academic growth. Ma et al. (2024) reported that students in culturally responsive classrooms are more likely to persist in the face of challenges, and Ober et al. (2023) found that these environments encourage both cognitive and social-emotional development. Therefore, incorporating CRT strategies is essential for creating inclusive learning environments that recognize and value students' diverse backgrounds, promote equitable access to academic content, and support the engagement and achievement of African American students.

Participants in this study emphasized the growing challenges they experience in addressing the African American achievement gap. At the organizational level, administrators and teacher-preparation programs may use the findings of this study to inform and reflect on the challenges teachers encounter when working to close the achievement gap for African American students. Findings suggest additional support is needed to design professional development programs that focus on providing teachers with practical tools and techniques for implementing CRT and opportunities for peer collaboration, building a collaborative approach to ongoing professional growth (Reddig et al., 2021). Institutions may consider reviewing hiring practices, curriculum development processes, and professional learning frameworks to ensure they align with equity-focused goals. In addition, schools and preparation programs might allocate resources toward sustained professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy and create structures that encourage collaboration among teachers to share effective strategies. These actions can contribute to a school-wide culture that promotes inclusive instruction and supports the academic success of African American students (McAllister

& Irvine, 2023). Receiving relevant professional development regarding CRT may provide teachers with the skills and strategies needed to connect with African American students, create inclusive learning environments, and adapt their instruction to meet the unique cultural needs of African American students (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024). This aligns with Blewitt et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of specific professional development for promoting African American students' academic achievement and development and encouraged policymakers and higher education institutions to include courses on CRT and dedicate resources for continuous professional development.

Educational leaders, policymakers, and curriculum developers may use the findings from this study to improve instructional decision-making. The research emphasizes the importance of CRT, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning strategies in addressing the diverse needs of African American students (Reid et al., 2021; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2019; Ruck et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). Findings from this study indicated that teachers are challenged with no autonomy and pacing of curriculum, which affects their ability to effectively meet the diverse needs of their students. These constraints can hinder efforts to implement responsive and inclusive curriculum practices (Fenuku & Akpaku, 2024; Narayanan et al., 2023). Therefore, decision-makers may consider revising curriculum frameworks to allow for greater flexibility, enabling teachers to integrate culturally relevant materials and adjust instructional pace based on student progress. Policies that support teacher input in curriculum planning and provide professional development in culturally responsive methods may help create learning environments that are more equitable and reflective of

the experiences of African American students. Such efforts have the potential to reduce disparities in academic achievement by ensuring that instructional approaches are responsive to the backgrounds and needs of all learners.

The implications of this study extend beyond classroom practices and encompass the role of families in supporting student achievement. For educational leaders and policymakers, these findings emphasize the importance of creating stronger partnerships between schools and families to address the academic achievement gap between African American and White students (Eden et al., 2024; Gale, 2024). Participants in this study confirmed the importance of parental involvement in academic achievement, aligning with Gale's (2024) observations regarding parental involvement positively influencing academic outcomes. Based on the findings of this study, there is a need to broaden support to include more effective strategies for implementing parental education programs that increase parental involvement in closing the achievement gap for African American students. Enhancing both the professional development teachers receive and the educational opportunities available to parents may empower families to better support their children's academic progress.

### **Conclusion**

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3. Current research is limited regarding the perspectives of early childhood teachers and the resources they need to close the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers (Bjorklund et al., 2020;

Dietrichson et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023). Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, I analyzed data collected from 13 early childhood teachers. Three key themes emerged: (a) teachers believe they can close the achievement gap; (b) teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations; and (c) teachers recommend strategies that help African American students succeed. These themes offer insight into the current state of the African American academic achievement gap and its implications for advancing more equitable and inclusive educational outcomes.

Although extensive research exists on the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers, few studies focus specifically on the perspectives of early childhood teachers and the challenges they encounter in closing this gap. The findings of this study addressed a significant gap in the literature concerning teachers' instructional practices which is shown in the persistent disparity of achievement for African American elementary students compared to their White peers (NASEM, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2023). Participants consistently emphasized that culturally relevant resources, CRT, active parental involvement, equal access to educational resources, and addressing socioeconomic challenges are essential for closing the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White peers (see Hecht et al., 2023; McBride, 2023; Skopek & Passaretta, 2021).

Findings reinforced the conclusions of Dotterer et al. (2022), demonstrating that closing the achievement gap necessitates individualized interventions such as differentiated instruction, increased autonomy for teachers, and enhanced parental

involvement. Participants emphasized the importance of culturally relevant resources in promoting student engagement and academic success. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that supports teachers in implementing instructional strategies specific to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of African American students (Pozas et al., 2021; Unal et al., 2022). By prioritizing these efforts, schools can advance equitable academic outcomes and improve long-term educational achievement for African American students.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol Guide

Date of the interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Begin Time: \_\_\_\_\_

End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Method of interview recording: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Pre-Interview Script:**

Welcome and thank you for deciding to participate in this qualitative study. In an effort to preserve your time, I will strive to complete this interview in a prompt manner. The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. I will be taking notes throughout this process.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of closing the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers in Grades 1–3 and what they believe they need to help close the achievement gap.

This interview is being conducted by myself, Cherie D. McElroy-Burch, a Walden University doctoral student. I have been in education for approximately 12 years. I have served in the capacities of an instructional assistant, early childhood teacher, and grade level chair. I am currently a mathematics EIP teacher at my school serving students in Grades 2-5.

As a participant in this study, I will not pose any risks to your health, well-being, or position in the school system. The interview will remain confidential, and your identity will not be made public. The data collected will be secured and used for this study only.

As mentioned, the interview will be recorded, and you can withdraw during any time. Do I have your permission to audio record this interview? Thank you. Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to start the recording? Recording will begin now.

### **Demographic Questions**

1. How long have you been in education? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How long have you been an early childhood education teacher? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How long have you worked teaching African American students reading and math? \_\_\_\_\_

## B. Interview Questions

1. What are your expectations for African American Grades 1–3 students?
2. How would you describe the African American and White students' achievement gap?
3. What challenges have you encountered when assisting African American students to close the achievement gap? What did you do to overcome that challenge? How has this challenge guided your planning and instruction?
4. What practices do you use to assist African American students in closing the academic achievement gap? What helped you decide which practice to use? How has the chosen practice helped with closing the achievement gap? What practice have you modified, and how did you modify it?
5. How do you differentiate the curriculum and instructional materials to ensure individual student needs are met, with the goal of closing the achievement gap?
6. How do you utilize formative and summative assessment strategies to identify and address learning gaps promptly, with the goal of closing the achievement gap?
7. What successes have you experienced when assisting African American students in closing the achievement gap? What made that event successful? How have your successes guided your planning and instruction?
8. What resources do you need to teach African American students and help close the African American and White student achievement gap? How might you use that resource to close the achievement gap?

9. What professional development might assist you in improving your teaching strategies to assist African American students and help close the African American and White student achievement gap?
10. Is there any additional information that you would like to share regarding closing the academic achievement gap between African American students and White students?

Possible follow up prompts that I will keep visible as I interview each participant:

What did you mean by.....?

Tell me more about.....

You mentioned.....

What do you mean by.....?

Please give me an example of when that.... worked/did not work.

## Appendix B: Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Themes

Open Code	Axial Code	Theme
Parental Involvement Parent education parents being aware education takes more than teachers	Parents must be involved	Teachers believe they can close the achievement gap.
PD where teachers can talk to one another More PD from teachers More PD for teachers	Teachers need more PD	
opportunities for teachers' voices to be heard opportunities for teachers to observe veteran teachers. plan/partner with other teachers	Teachers must engage with each other	
lack of time to teach teachers need more practice teaching lack collaboration	Teachers need more time to properly teach	
No autonomy in teaching AA students no autonomy for students Need interventions to fill the gaps	Autonomy lacking	
culturally relevant materials culturally relevant teaching	AA culture must be included	
Closing academic gaps is bigger than individual classrooms. Closing gaps is bigger than teaching adjustments. Ongoing process to close gaps. gap is obvious in testing	Academic gap is extensive	Teachers believe the achievement gap is extensive due to unreasonable expectations.
Teach to the test Level of students not accounted in testing testing does not depict accurate results of students frequent testing	Testing widens gap	
Pacing of curriculum scripted lessons Unrealistic goals	Unreasonable school expectations	
lack of resources for AA students low-income schools Lack of technology	AA students lack resources	
lack of exposure to academic materials Lack of foundational skills	AA lack exposure to needed basics	
lack of social skills Lack of real-world experiences lack social emotional development	AA students lack social abilities	
Socioeconomic factors affect academic achievement Socioeconomic differences between AA and White White students have access to more opportunities than AA students.	AA students' socio-economic deficits	

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Data driven instruction Just in time instruction Plan for reteaching	Successful teaching strategies	Teachers recommend strategies that help AA students succeed
Building relationships with family building relationships with students feel Treat all students the same		
Need manipulatives Need hands on experiences Need hands on class materials	Resources are needed	
teacher belief influences student mindset student comfort leads to taking risks Praise increases student motivation Praise increases student confidence	Teachers can influence AA learning	
Students' mindset changes with success. Students are active participants in learning Students' mindset affects learning.		
student engagement connecting learning to student interests whole child education	Student engagement leads to success	
poor behaviors in class need increased student accountability	Behaviors problems	
Use small groups Differentiated learning personalized learning builds success	Strategies to individualize learning	

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