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Exploring the Service-Learning Volunteer Experience of African American Male Educators in Urban Schools

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Walden University
2025

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Abstract

Educators who self-identify as African American male educators are underrepresented in educational leadership and scholarship on service learning, despite the significant roles they play in shaping urban educational spaces. In this qualitative phenomenological study, the lived service experiences of five African American male educators who engaged in service-learning and volunteerism in urban schools were explored. The purpose was to examine how these educators narrated their service experiences and how those experiences intersected with their identity as African American males. African American male theory was used to frame the study, emphasizing cultural heritage, resistance to deficit perspectives, and the affirmation of Black male identity. Data were collected through a series of three in-depth interviews per participant and analyzed through thematic coding and cross-case synthesis. Six distinct themes burgeoned across the interviews: spiritual calling, mentorship legacy, identity reclamation, community representation, educator purpose, and cultural affirmation. Participants described service-learning as both a professional responsibility and a culturally grounded expression of their values, spirituality, and identity. The study has implications for educational practice and policy, suggesting that service-learning should be recognized as a culturally affirming pedagogy. Institutions such as colleges and school systems, and teacher education programs can benefit from integrating African American male theory into curriculum development to support the holistic identities and contributions of Black male educators.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family. My husband, Mike, has walked with me every step of this journey, supporting me with enthusiasm, love, and kindness. What is ours is ours, and this is ours. My sons. Michael & Dorian. One and Two. Divinely gifted to me. They have walked with me every step of this journey, supporting me with excitement, pride, and amazement at what feats mom can accomplish, on a little sleep and a cup or two of lava java. What is ours is ours. This is ours. To my baby sister, Kristoher Heard. It's just us now. We are all we've got. I am amazed by you. Through your trials, you manage to find a way to support me, with humor, through the tears, on what seem to be the roughest days, somehow, some way, over distance, be we near or far, it's just us. What is ours is ours. This is ours. Mommy & Daddy. Your courage, wisdom, fearlessness, fight, tenacity, and your LOVE were with me on every single step of this journey. I AM because you did. I miss you. Your Gia is a PhD now. What is ours is ours. This is ours.

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Dr. McCoy! We made it. I am really going to miss you. You have been absolutely the best. The Zoom meetings kept me sane. Your humor kept me smiling when I wanted to cry, which I did sometimes. Your genuine support kept me committed to the process. Everyone needs a believer, and sometimes when you are in this process, they aren't that plentiful, so to know that you were there was the steady normal that I benefited from throughout the years. Thank you, Dr. McCoy!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Volunteering is performing work or service without the benefit of financial payment, expecting that the work involved will ultimately help people or improve conditions or situations (Gronlund & Falk, 2019). There are various types of volunteering; service-learning is one of them. According to Santiago-Ortiz (2019), service-learning is an opportunity for college students to make the connection between classroom learning and practice by volunteering in marginalized communities. Critical service-learning forces college students to think about the systems that prevent service recipients from creating change that improves the adverse life circumstances and conditions they experience (Hart, 2006). When volunteers are deployed to schools, they provide service and access to their network and social capital, and the school community experiences benefits like reduced principal referrals, improved school safety, communication, parental involvement, and improved overall school climate and culture (Rebok et al., 2019).

Esplin et al. (2012) emphasized that there are disparities in participation rates between African American male students and their white counterparts in beneficial collegiate activities that promote success. The deeply rooted tradition of service held by African American men, especially in the context of African American fraternal organizations, is not recognized as service or leadership experience for the African American male student (Druery & Brooms, 2019). African American male students have historically participated in leadership and service through membership in fraternal organizations centered on the African American male (Druery & Brooms, 2019). This

lack of recognition of the service of African American students relegates them to passive roles rather than those that challenge and grow their civic leadership potential during service-learning opportunities. The data and narrative around the African American male student experience suggest they are fraught with more challenges than their African American female counterparts. According to Harris et al. (2021), the African American male student faces immense challenges compared to all other demographics of students from elementary school to college, resulting in devastating outcomes such as low standardized test scores, low graduation rates, low literacy rates, low college or trade school attendance rates and low college and trade school graduation rates. Outcomes indicate that when African American males do appear in college classrooms, they lack the skill to thrive; however, increasing an African American male's social and academic integration during college matriculation develops African American male students who can achieve the goal of college graduation (Wood & Palmer, 2016).

Part of social and academic integration is determined by how a student interacts with or utilizes student activities, resources, and services, such as active and collaborative learning, which includes service-learning (Wood & Palmer, 2016). Tolliver and Miller (2018) emphasized the importance of addressing the indefatigable achievement gap experienced by African American college students through critical strategies and support systems that empower men who self-identify as African American to persist and graduate from college. Service-learning opportunities tailored to African American male students can enhance their capacity to cultivate leadership and transformative roles within their communities, ultimately fostering empowerment and liberation for themselves and

individuals with similar cultural and experiential backgrounds (Druery & Brooms, 2019). Service learning centered on African American male students helps them experience social and academic fusion in the content of their college experience. They are given the opportunity to develop leadership skills and cultivate confidence that is liberating for them individually and collectively.

Background

When exploring the service-learning volunteer experience of educators identifying as African American males, it is critical to recognize the different volunteering modalities and how people volunteer. The most common volunteer categories are community service/volunteer work, board, council, or organizational service, and an informal gathering with others to address community concerns (Johnson & Lee, 2017). African American community members are volunteering; however, they do not volunteer as Whites do. African Americans often volunteer through board or council service or informal gatherings to address community concerns (Johnson & Lee, 2017). AmeriCorps, the leading national organization connecting individuals and organizations to create community impact, defines formal volunteering as helping others through organizations, informal helping as helping others outside of organizations, and organized or formal volunteering (AmeriCorps, 2021). It is estimated that 23.2% of Americans participate in formal volunteering, whereas 51% participate in informal helping; African American citizens are most frequently engaged as informal helping volunteers (AmeriCorps, 2021).

Community-Based Volunteering

According to Leland (1996), community-based organizations exist to meet community needs and be the community's voice. Examples of community-based organizations include schools, churches, hospitals, and legal aid groups. Community-based volunteering is volunteering through organizations serving as levers, giving communities access to resources and services that meet the community's needs and enable the community's voice to be heard (Leland, 1996). Additionally, community-based workers, who can be volunteers or paid staff, are labeled such because they are individuals who work and serve in the community and are also trusted and valued by those served (Kyounghae et al., 2016). Community-based volunteering involves a dependency upon a relationship of reciprocity between providers and recipients of service.

Volunteering as Civic Engagement & Social Justice

According to Richards-Schuster et al. (2019), civic engagement is a term that is not well defined but whose meaning can be inferred based on the known activities associated with civic engagement, which are works performed by the public that impact public issues and problems. Activities that are considered civic engagement range from volunteering to political activism. Many college students develop a sense of civic engagement during their college experience. College students look at civic engagement as actionable steps to change, which is why Richards-Schuster et al. (2019) stated that amongst college students, there is a direct link between civic engagement and social change that they carry with them into life long after they have graduated.

Civic Engagement Volunteering

Civic engagement relies on certain factors, like seizing the right moment and taking organized action using available resources during social movements or events; these actions are driven by a shared commitment to fairness and justice (Youniss, 2009). The traditional service-learning pedagogy upholds imbalanced power structures and thematic analysis in qualitative research of social divisions based on class and race, creating obstacles that minimize civically engaged volunteering amongst marginalized groups of students (Anzaldua, 1999). Placing service-learning primarily within the context of the white student journey fails to emphasize the need to empower Black students for leadership roles that contribute to the liberation of their own communities through civic engagement volunteering (Mitchell et al., 2012; Wightman, 2019).

Service-Learning Volunteering

Service-learning volunteering is a pedagogy connecting students and marginalized communities with great need through service and relationships that mutually benefit the student and the recipient through four elements: planning, service implementation, structured reflection, and celebrating accomplishments (Hart, 2006). Service-learning is the fusion of academics and service. Service-learning benefits students by taking academics outside of the classroom and into the community (Hart, 2015). Service-learning also benefits the student by strengthening leadership skills, closing the gap between theory and practice, allowing students to become immersed in communities, exposing students to real-life experiences within the community context, and fostering a mindset for teamwork to achieve a goal (Hart, 2015).

Although service-learning can benefit the student and the recipient of the students' service, there are some drawbacks to the service-learning model. In urban public school volunteering, the traditional service-learning model produces a volunteer pool of middle-class white college students (Hart, 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Weah et al., 2000). These students gain access to marginalized communities where public school students receive volunteer service in exchange for scholastic credit. Often, these service learners enter urban communities without an intimate knowledge of the community or shared lived experiences with community members they work with directly (Garry, 2021).

Basinger and Bartholomew (2006) noted that service-learning needs to be viewed as a mutual benefit for the service-learning volunteer and the service recipient. Service-learning volunteering benefits students and school communities, but schools often cannot engage volunteers with intimate knowledge of the communities served. Ruth Harris, the first African American president of Stowe Teacher's College, implemented a preservice-learning volunteer requirement emphasizing the importance of volunteers developing a deep understanding of the communities where they worked (Garry, 2021). Harris asserted that a volunteer's intimate knowledge of a student's community reduces the unfair treatment of students and makes the volunteer a better advocate for student needs, making them a critical access point to build human and social capital (Garry, 2021).

Critical Service-Learning

Traditional service-learning volunteer experiences reinforce divisions created by social norms such as class and race (Mitchell, 2008; Robinson, 2000; Roschelle et al.,

2000). Additionally, the traditional service-learning model reinforces power structures where White middle-class students identify with their privilege and discount the need to examine the conditions and social inequities that plague those receiving their services (Mitchell, 2008; Robinson, 2000; Roschelle et al., 2000).

Critical service-learning exceeds the parameters of traditional service-learning by shifting the students' focus to inequality within the communities they serve. Though critical service-learning affords students an alternative to traditional service-learning, the focus continues to center on the experience of privileged youth (Hart, 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Robinson, 2000; Weah et al., 2000). In critical service-learning pedagogy, courses orient students to a social justice perspective to transform their views of the communities where they serve. Power structures that relegate African American college students to passive roles during service-learning experiences are upheld. In that case, students cannot lead in the work to revitalize their communities, become better advocates for recipients, and act as access points to vital social capital.

Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering benefits the volunteer and the recipient of the volunteer's service. Avvisati et al. (2014) indicated that when marginalized students in public schools interact with volunteers, the students experience positive effects in academics, behavior, attendance, and life outcomes; these benefits also spill over to marginalized students not directly engaged with the volunteer. Whether the student receives the direct service of the volunteer or is a beneficiary by proximity, marginalized students experience positive benefits when volunteers are present in the school community.

Human Capital

Human capital is an individual's ability and potential to contribute to personal and societal economic achievement (Gindo et al., 2018). According to Cheng et al. (2022), human capital is one of three resources identified in resource theory that support volunteering. The other resources are social and cultural capital. Human capital is represented by the knowledge and skills individuals bring into the volunteer experience that impact productivity and outcomes. Examples of these types of resources would be a volunteer's educational background, previous training history, and professional experience.

Social Capital

Social capital is the formation of trust in mutually beneficial relationships among individuals who gather regularly to engage in collaborative activities (Martikke et al., 2019). Further, social capital reflects a volunteer's social connections, access to information, trust, and relationships that encourage others to volunteer (Harvey et al., 2007; Kay & Bradbury, 2009). Storr and Spaaij (2017) stated that individuals can inherit social capital and are subject to uneven distribution of social capital based on interpersonal, institutional, and structural variables.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital refers to the attitudes, beliefs, and moral perspectives one brings to a volunteer experience that reflects the individual's affiliation to groups such as religious groups (Forbes et al., 2014). Those affiliated with religious groups may share

values and perspectives aligned with their religious identity and demonstrate service, empathy, and compassion.

African American students have decreased opportunities to build human and social capital, which prevents them from building a positive self-image when volunteers who look like and share cultural identities fail to participate in school-based volunteer activities (Lee & Rispoli, 2019). African American students involuntarily forfeit the benefits of volunteering, like increased human and social capital, when opportunities to engage with volunteers who share their racial and cultural identities are scarce (Johnson & Lee, 2017). Individuals who self-identify as African American males who eschew service-learning volunteering in schools are excluded from the opportunity to strengthen individual and collective efficacy (Vidal de Hames et al., 2019). African American male college students miss the opportunity to contribute to strengthening the African American community when they are denied opportunities to build communities in schools through service-learning volunteerism.

Problem Statement

The underrepresentation of African American male college students in service-learning volunteering programs is a significant problem, leading to missed opportunities for self-identification with a rich tradition of service, limited development of advanced leadership skills, and reduced engagement in meaningful civic interactions for this underrepresented group of college students (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The exclusion of students who identify as African American males from service-learning volunteering affects the students themselves. It hinders the potential benefits for their service

recipients when they forfeit meaningful interactions based on shared racial and cultural identities and experiences (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Educators who identify as African American males who deeply understand the African American community and share lived experiences with African American students face barriers such as institutional bias and lack of support structure, which discourage them from participating in service-learning volunteering at the same rates as their White counterparts (Wagner & Cleary, 2019). Support structures such as affinity groups, culturally specific housing, mentoring, tutoring and extracurricular clubs and activities help African American male students develop social connections that lessen their feelings of isolation (Taffe, 2022).

It is up to collegiate educators to develop opportunities and programs that encourage African American male students to emerge from isolation and begin to engage in programs and activities that are supportive of their academic success; service learning is one such program (Taffe, 2022). The limited participation of college students who identify as African American males and come from under-resourced communities in service learning programs hinders their recognition as contributors to a legacy of community service, curtails their ability to use their social and cultural insights, and diminishes the democratic value of civic involvement, which enables individuals to partake in the empowerment of their community of origin. (Anzaldua, 1987; Weah et al., 2000).

Purpose of the Study

In this qualitative study, I explored the lived volunteer experience of K-12 educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males. I assumed that

service-learning and volunteerism originated in the 1960s because it was then that volunteer activities were formalized through the creation of the National Service Corps; however, there is a rich tradition of volunteerism in the African American community amongst those who self-identify as African American (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Lott, 2013). My study may support a movement towards African American students being the center of the service-learning experience to increase their civic leadership and positive impact on their communities. Increasing the participation of African American males in civic leadership may increase representation for those students and individuals who can see themselves when they experience African Americans serving their community.

Research Questions

According to Rosenberger (2000), a robust exploration of service-learning requires the consideration of power dynamics during field experience. Addressing and eliminating the savior mentality commonly found among conventional volunteers by transforming service-learning models into opportunities that revolve around marginalized communities' agency, strength, and empowerment is imperative (Weah et al., 2000). My research was guided by two primary research questions related to educators in urban public schools who identify as African American males and who participated in service-learning volunteer experiences while in college:

RQ 1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

SQ11: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

RQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

SQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study

The theory grounding this study was African American Male Theory (AAMT). AAMT is built on the framework of ancient and current worldviews and the ecological systems theory (Bush & Bush, 2013). People from many indigenous cultures worldwide believe that humans exist in close relationships with one another, the environment, and other phenomena, though often moving in different directions; this belief system is the foundation of ecological systems theory (Bush & Bush, 2013; Cajete, 1994; Ming-Dao, 1986; Some, 1993). The ecological systems theory asserts that a child's development is influenced by multiple factors stemming from five distinct systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1989, 2005; Bush & Bush, 2013).

AAMT applies the African philosophical belief in the interconnectedness between all humans, their environment, and their lived experiences to construct a multisystem framework upheld by the ecological systems theory. AAMT is based on incorporating five interconnected systems and one additional system called the subsystem used to anchor six tenets; the six tenets of AAMT are (Bush & Bush, 2013):

The individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectories of African American boys and men's lives are best analyzed using an ecological systems approach.

- There is something unique about being male and of African descent.
- There is continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African American boys and men.
- African American boys and men are resilient and resistant.
- Race and racism, coupled with classism and sexism, have a profound impact on every aspect of the lives of African American boys and men.
- The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men should be pursuing social justice.

By employing AATM, I could filter my research through social constructs such as race, class, socioeconomic status, and politics, each of which plays an integral role in the journey and experience of humans who identify as being African American and male while pursuing careers as educators in urban school settings (see Bush & Bush, 2013).

Nature of the Study

The study was a phenomenological qualitative study where I used in-depth interviews to examine participants' lived experiences with service-learning volunteering and their lifelong relationship with service in their communities of identity. The in-depth interview allows the participant to narrate their experience layer by layer throughout the process, including a series of three interviews with each participant (Seidman, 2019). My primary focus for exploring the service-learning experience of educators in urban schools

who self-identify as African American, and male was understanding what it means to them to serve children through service-learning in their shared racial and cultural community and how service has impacted various facets of their lives. Seideman's (2019) approach allows a researcher to explore the experiences, perspectives, and narrative results generated from the series of interviews. Interview one will explore the early life of the participant; interview two guides the researcher and participant through a series of questions that allow the recall and reconstruction of details related to service that were exposed during interview one (Seidman, 2021). The final interview allows the participant to articulate the meaning of their service-learning volunteer experience and the significance of service in their community of identity (Seidman, 2019).

According to Morris (2015), studies delving into sensitive matters such as race and childhood experiences related to race, socioeconomic status. and opportunity are perfect for the in-depth interview, especially to examine an individual's experience with those phenomena. The interviews were semistructured, allowing for the interviews to be conducted conversationally, creating an environment where participants are comfortable with questions that may touch on sensitive topics and unpleasant or traumatic experiences (see Morris, 2015). Other benefits of this type of in-depth interview is the versatility of the approach, leaving space for the researcher to ask a broad range of questions on the topic of focus, and the ability to use technological tools such as Zoom or Google Meet to conduct interviews (Morris, 2015).

When participants were identified, I asked for referrals, employing the snowball method because participants are likely to be connected to other individuals who fit the

criteria to participate in the study (seeMorris, 2015). The goal for the sample size was five to eight participants. According to Sideman (2019), in-depth interviews produce rich, multilayered, complex data, making three interviews enough. Because it may be more difficult to recruit educators who identify as African American males working in urban schools, limiting the number of participants to five to eight increased the chance that a large enough sample will be achieved. Also, according to Creswell and Creswell (2017), phenomenological studies should collect a sample size between three and 10. Setting the sample size goal of between five and eight participants considers the multiinterview process as well as the nature of the study and will allow saturation to occur.

Definitions

African American: A term that many use to describe a person's race only. It is now known that the term African American encapsulates race and the unique culture and experiences of the group of individuals who self-identify as Black and American in the genealogical connection to the history of enslavement (Akhtar, 2012; Sullivan & Esmail, 2012).

African American male educator: One who self-identifies as an African American male with a racial and cultural connectedness to Africa that influences their educational perspective and approach (Haper & Davis, 2012).

Critical service-learning volunteering: A student is required to be immersed in learning that expands their knowledge about the economic, social, and political challenges community members face that position them to need service. Centering the service-learning experience on social justice for those served instead of centering the

service-learning on the college student is the key component of Critical Service-learning (Bruce & Brown, 2010).

Mode of Volunteering: How an individual goes into a community to render service through volunteering and how that service is categorized so that it can be measured; the mode is determined by the organization facilitating the service and their volunteer needs (Johnson & Lee, 2017).

Service-learning volunteering: An experience facilitated through higher-education institutions to provide opportunities for students to transfer the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom to practical experience gained by working in their field of study, most often in communities with high needs (Hart, 2006). Service-learning upholds institutionally oppressive practices by creating volunteer pools of middle-class White students and deploying them into marginalized communities with limited knowledge or experience with the communities they will serve (Garry, 2021).

Volunteering: The performance of service without the expectation of pay for the service rendered; services rendered are usually rendered to communities impacted by social or economic challenges, resulting in a lack of access to levers of change by the affected community (Gronlund & Falk, 2019).

Assumptions

For this study, several assumptions were considered. First, I assumed that participants would respond honestly to questions and describe their experiences to the best of their ability and with as much detail as possible. I also assumed that the participants in the study self-identify as African American and male and have experience

with service-learning volunteering and working in urban public schools. I assumed that the participants desired to contribute to this study for the benefit of other college students with similar racial and cultural identities, as well as for those urban school students who are the beneficiaries of service-learning volunteering by individuals who self-identify as African American males.

Scope and Delimitations

My primary focus was on the service-learning volunteer experiences of African American male educators in urban schools who engaged in service-learning as a component of their progression toward a college degree. Restrictive delimitations for this study are educators who identify as African American and male in urban schools with service-learning volunteer experience but no history or relationship with service in their cultural and racial communities before or during their service-learning experience. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, those who identify as African American males may have exited the education profession; all participants must be educators in urban schools and identify as African American and male.

Limitations

Identifying educators who self-identify as African American and male and participate in service-learning volunteering presented challenges. I depended on virtual social networks, like those on social media, to identify potential organizations and groups of individuals who self-identify as African American males who are educators in urban schools. I also relied on individuals who self-identify as Black men who are educators and have access to or relationships with educators who self-identify as African American

males. Attendance at three separate interview sessions could have been a limitation when trying to schedule around educators' busy lives. However, the five participants included in the study attended all interviews, and if either needed to reschedule, they communicated that via email and used the scheduling link to reschedule their session. Finally, the target population being self-identified African American males could also have been a limitation if the participants felt vulnerable or were triggered and did not feel comfortable expressing themselves or displaying emotion in front of me.

Significance

This study may increase the participation of college students who self-identify as African American males in service-learning volunteering in public schools. The study may increase opportunities for African American recipients of volunteer service through service learning to engage with educators who share racial and cultural experiences while enabling male volunteers who self-identify as African American to experience the benefits of volunteering. Enhancing opportunities for African American students to interact with educators who share similar racial and cultural identities through volunteer service can potentially directly influence student performance in urban public schools. Empowering African American male educators to lead in their communities can create positive social change by fostering representation and racial matching in education. This, in turn, enhances the overall learning experience for African American students, providing them with role models who share similar racial and cultural identities, ultimately contributing to improved academic performance, increased engagement, and a sense of belonging in educational settings.

Significance to Social Change

The results of this study may improve outcomes for African American students by extending access to meaningful service-learning volunteer experiences for college students and creating opportunities for students attending school in urban schools to engage with educators who share their racial and cultural identities. Improving outcomes for African American students in urban public schools and colleges is positive social change. This research could also benefit nonprofit organizations, specifically public schools and nonprofits that support them, to understand the experiences of educators who identify as African American males. Gaining a deeper understanding of the service-learning experience of educators who self-identify as African American males could also inform how organizations develop their recruitment and retention strategies and could inform how they collaborate with these educators to ultimately enhance and improve the experience for both the college student and the recipient of their service through service-learning volunteering. Finally, this study has the potential to document the value of volunteerism held by marginalized communities so that this knowledge can be included in the pedagogy of service-learning, especially when the service occurs in urban public school communities.

Summary

Volunteering or helping others occurs formally and informally in communities worldwide. Formal analyses of volunteerism amongst citizens emerged in the United States in the early 20th century. As with many things, volunteerism amongst African Americans was not measured because many African Americans failed to meet the

economic or social standards that would align them with volunteer opportunities usually taken advantage of by middle to upper-income White Americans. Service-learning volunteering as part of a college student's matriculation develops homogeneous volunteer pools and neglects to center this service around the expertise of students who share racial and cultural identities with the urban school students who are service recipients through service-learning initiatives.

In this qualitative study, I explored the experiences of urban school educators who identify as African American males. Through their narratives, participants will provide valuable accounts that may inform predominantly white institutions in developing service-learning experiences in urban school communities that empower college students who identify racially and culturally with the students served to lead their communities in solving their issues and positive social change. In Chapter 1, I described volunteering and the various types and modes of volunteerism; this chapter also emphasizes the relevance of volunteerism in the African American community and the importance of highlighting and developing students who identify as African American and males into strong educators and advocates within their community. I also described AAMT, the study's theoretical framework, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. An exploration of the lived service learning experience of African American male educators may contribute new understandings that help to recruit more African American male educators in urban schools. If the study results are used to inform service learning programs to meet the unique needs of African American male college students, there is the potential to attract more of these students to the profession, filling.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Volunteering is an essential civic activity in which individuals participate on local, regional, national, and even global levels. How individuals volunteer and on what level they participate in volunteering are often influenced by a person's race and socioeconomic status (Barakat & Konstantinidis, 2023). Volunteerism gained significance in modern society because volunteers can fill service gaps for organizations addressing societal needs (Sanders, 2021). Government institutions, school systems, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based organizations are some of the entities that rely on a volunteer workforce (Barakat & Konstantinidis, 2023).

Research indicates that volunteering has many positive benefits, such as improved health, increased social capital, gaining, or enhancing knowledge and skills, and access to opportunities (Wilson et al., 2020). An individual can volunteer in various organizations and various ways; a volunteer's responsibilities can range from small assignments to assignments with a significant organizational impact (Kelemen et al., 2017). While volunteering is an activity in which anyone can participate, it is noted that typically, volunteers come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, are often considered well-educated, and most often identify racially as White; these are members of the dominant group and are most likely to volunteer (Hustinx et al., 2022). Formal volunteer activities attract the typical White, middle to upper-class volunteer, while informal volunteering is where most African American people contribute their time (Cheng et al., 2022). According to Hwang and Lee (2023), informal volunteering is preferred in African

American communities because these opportunities are viewed as more flexible and more closely aligned with the community's actual needs.

I begin Chapter 2 with an introduction to the dynamic practice of volunteering, then examines the search strategy, theoretical framework, and the literature review on AAMT and service-learning volunteering. I discuss the pedagogy of service-learning volunteering. In conclusion, I discuss the lack of engagement of students who self-identify as African American males and how it prevents them from identifying as contributors to the empowerment of their communities while also establishing themselves as experts in their communities and as civic leaders through service-learning volunteering. The target demographic for this study was men ages 18 and older who self-identify as African American males and are active or retired educators in urban schools who participated in service-learning volunteering as a component of their college curriculum.

Literature Search Strategy

Exploring contemporary data and literature examining volunteering, specifically service-learning volunteering and the service-learning volunteer experience of educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males, initiated with The Walden University Library. Other trustworthy sources queried were .com, .gov, and .org. websites and databases focused on education, volunteering, service-learning volunteering, and service-learning pedagogy. Specific databases used for the inquiry were Education Source, ERIC, AmeriCorps, APApsychinfo, Annie E. Casey, NCES Publications, ProQuest Central, Sage Journals, US Department of Health and Human Services, and the

US Department of Education. Keywords and phrases used to query the databases for pertinent literature included *volunteering, service-learning volunteering, service-learning pedagogy, traditional service-learning, critical service-learning, mode of volunteering, ecological systems theory, African American male theory, social capital, human capital, racial and cultural matching, African American male volunteering, African American male educators, benefits of volunteering, college experience of African American students, K-12 school experiences of African American students* and *African American male students.*

Theoretical Foundation

African American Male Theory

Ecological systems theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), is a comprehensive framework exploring the interplay between human development and environmental contexts. According to Crawford (2020), the ecological systems theory provides a lens under which to observe human development without fixating on a person's deficits. Like ecological systems theory, AAMT is used to explore the lives of African American males in relation to their external environments and not through the lens of what others perceive as deficits (Bush & Bush, 2013). AAMT is a theoretical framework applied to cultivate an understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by African American males in social, cultural, and institutional contexts, and suggests that studies of African American males be rooted in the study and understanding of Africa (Bush & Bush, 2018).

Harper and Davis (2012) are credited with developing extensive works emphasizing the intersectionality of race, gender, and other social identities in shaping the lives of African American males. AAMT provides a glimpse into the complexities of identity formation, educational attainment, social relationships, and the impact of systemic inequities on African American males (Bush & Bush, 2018). AAMT is interdisciplinary and amalgamates perspectives from sociology, psychology, education, and other fields to provide a holistic understanding of the African American male experience within the broader social context of the United States (Bush & Bush, 2013).

AAMT and Ecological Systems Theory (EST) are related in their emphasis on understanding individuals within the broader context of their social and environmental surroundings. AAMT is used to explore the experiences of African American males within their sociocultural and institutional contexts, considering the impact of systemic inequities on their lives (Bush & Bush, 2013) Similarly, EST, developed by Bronfenbrenner, focuses on the influence of various environmental systems, such as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, on human development and behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Both theories recognize the significance of the broader social environment in shaping individual experiences and emphasize the interconnectedness of various systems in understanding human development. These connections highlight the complementary perspectives offered by AAMT and EST in analyzing the experiences of African American males within their complex social and environmental contexts.

The Role of Race

Volunteering can be a rich and rewarding experience mutually beneficial for the recipient of service and the volunteer; however, the benefit to either will be determined by the volunteer program's structure. Service-learning volunteering, over time, has transformed into an activity focused on the experience of the White student and most beneficial to the White student entering marginalized communities holding power (Weah et al., 2000). Most often, communities being served are demographically people of color and socioeconomically challenged. These communities are also often disproportionately majority African American. Because service-learning is traditionally structured to cater to the White college student and create an environment for those students to develop a missionary or savior complex, African American college students and recipients of service forgo critical benefits and the opportunity to contribute to solutions as leaders and experts (Steinfeld & Jean, 2019).

Examining the service-learning experience of educators in urban schools who identify as African American males is critical. Through service-learning volunteering, students can develop critical skills such as leadership and relationship-building skills, both of which will also help the student build valuable social capital (Kezar, 2002). Additionally, African American students, especially male students, rarely encounter the opportunity to engage with educators who share the same cultural and racial experiences (Harvard University et al., 2014). Examining service-learning in the context of African American males may inform efforts to address the challenge of recruiting and retaining educators who self-identify as African American males.

Students in urban schools who self-identify as African American benefit from in-school experiences with educators who share their racial and cultural identities (Harvard University, 2014). African American students make up 15% of America's public school population, while 79% of America's public educators are White women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; NCES, 2020). It is imperative that colleges and universities structure service-learning programs inclusively to ensure college access to students who self-identify as African American males and gain access to service-learning volunteer opportunities in their programs of study.

Benefits of Volunteering

When considering volunteering, the assumption is that the recipient of volunteer service would experience all the benefits. However, research indicates that individuals benefit from volunteering their time and service to others (Anderson, 2014). Volunteering has economic benefits and provides access to social networks, professional experiences, and the acquisition of new skills; additionally, some studies show that volunteering has health benefits (Sauer, 2020).

Wilson et al. (2020) explored the economic benefits of volunteering and found that the benefits vary based on social class; higher-class volunteers tend to reap greater economic rewards, accentuating the socioeconomic dynamics at play within volunteerism. Research indicates that volunteering impacts earnings through three main channels: skill acquisition and work-related experience, expansion of social networks, and ability signaling (Bruno & Fiorello, 2016) Volunteering provides individuals with opportunities to acquire a diverse range of skills, encompassing both hard skills like

business management, carpentry, or software usage, and soft skills such as client relations, effective communication, and teamwork, thereby contributing to their personal and professional development while potentially enhancing their economic prospects (Kamerade, 2015).

Volunteering is associated with reduced symptoms of depression, better self-reported health, fewer functional limitations, and lower mortality (Anderson et al., 2014). However, the economic benefits of volunteering are contingent on social class, with professionals and managers benefiting more than those in other occupations (Wilson et al., 2020). Volunteers' perceived benefits vary by volunteer characteristics, with older, less educated, and retired individuals reporting the greatest benefit (Connolly, 2015). Furthermore, volunteering can be a form of learning (Chen, 2016).

With so many positive benefits, volunteering is an activity that could enhance the lives of many. There are endless choices of volunteer experiences and organizations that employ volunteers to carry out their services. Volunteer activities fall into categories such as formal and informal; formal volunteering often occurs in organizations that do not attract African American volunteers (Southby et al., 2019). African Americans most often volunteer in ways that they can directly impact their communities, and these activities are often associated with churches or other faith-based organizations. Because African Americans are frequently intimidated or do not feel welcome in some organizations, they may avoid formal volunteering, and often, the volunteer activities of African Americans go undocumented. Unfortunately, due to their lack of connection to organizations that serve their communities and other barriers like work, lack of transportation, or lack of

skills necessary to participate in specific volunteer activities, African Americans do not volunteer at the same rate as their White counterparts, which means that they are not experiencing the benefits of volunteering that their White counterparts experience (Sauer, 2020; Southby, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020).

Volunteer Service Type

Community-Based Volunteering

Sanders (2021) explained that during the 16th century, volunteering was structured to meet the needs of disenfranchised members of the community by members of the church who were socioeconomically positioned to give. These members were asked to carry out their Christian duty by caring for the poor and the marginalized and helping them meet their needs where the government could not do so (Sanders, 2021). Additionally, Sanders (2021) established that the community in community-based volunteering refers to individuals who are part of communities impacted due to low socioeconomic status or socioeconomic challenges, leaving them disenfranchised from traditional institutions. Further, community-based volunteering relies on including community voice by granting access to resources needed to address challenges (Leland, 1996). Finally, community-based volunteering helps community members identify ways to be a part of the solution to their challenges instead of focusing on deficits within the community served.

Service-Learning Volunteering

Service-learning is a type of volunteering that I closely examined in this study. Service-learning volunteerism occurs when college students take the knowledge gained

through their coursework and put it into practice in the community. Often, the target communities of service-learning volunteerism are underresourced, disenfranchised, and disempowered, and could benefit from the service provided by college students. In the case of urban schools, most students would benefit.

Like other modes of volunteering, individuals who self-identify as African American males are underrepresented in service-learning volunteering (Salsberg et al., 2021). This underrepresentation of individuals who self-identify as African American males has created a gap in the research on service-learning volunteering amongst educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males.

Traditional Service-Learning

Traditional service-learning is described as an educational experience integrated into courses for academic credit, wherein students participate in structured service activities designed to address community needs and utilize reflection to deepen their comprehension of their coursework (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Traditional service-learning creates opportunities for faculty of service driven disciplines to align the curriculum with service-learning volunteer experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Bruce & Brown, 2010; Mortari & Ubbiali, 2021).

The institution, faculty, students, and community commonly wrap around a specific need in a local community in a service-learning program (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). The primary role of college students is to assist with implementing services within established organizations during their service-learning experiences; this takes priority over challenging inequitable structures they encounter during service-learning (Robinson,

2000). College faculty and their students most often lead traditional service-learning projects, leaving the community members as recipients of the effort and positioning the volunteers and community members as opposers rather than collaborators during the service-learning project (Brickford & Reynolds, 2002; Bruce & Brown, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). This model creates a structure that positions faculty and students as privileged service-learning volunteers and minimizes community members to acquiescent service beneficiaries. Kezar (2002) indicated that valuable service-learning experiences develop leadership skills while also encouraging students to examine their social and moral responsibilities.

Social inequities within marginalized communities and between marginalized and nonmarginalized communities catalyzed academics to incorporate service into curriculum, pedagogy, and university missions, spawning traditional service-learning framework, which is used most often within service centered disciplines such as social work, teaching, and counseling (Bringle & Hatcher 1995; Bruce & Brown, 2010). While college students and their professors implement service-learning projects from the privileged position of those providing the service, community members are relegated to a more passive recipient role; this leaves the faculty and students to experience benefits like elevated social and moral awareness and nurtured leadership skills (Kezar, 2002). Another reason college professors highly value service-learning is the incorporation of civic education that is enmeshed in the traditional service-learning framework, which is another benefit college students enrolled in service-learning programs will experience (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Densmore, 2000; Kezar, 2002). With college professors and

their students primarily responsible for planning and implementing service-learning programs, Kazar (2002) notes that they will also determine the criteria for effectiveness and assess the program for effectiveness.

Benefits of Traditional Service-Learning

As with other forms of volunteering, service-learning volunteers experience positive benefits, which include civic scholarship, personal growth of students, and the students' ability to confidently contribute to the world (Hart, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). Despite the positive benefits, traditional service-learning inadequately undertakes the etiology of urban and rural impoverishment college students may encounter through service-learning (Hart, 2006). Often, the intricate social and political dynamics associated with poverty are disregarded to concentrate on perfecting aspects of programs (Hart, 2006; Robinson, 2000). The result of omitting the social and political dynamics associated with poverty from service-learning is a diminished experience of positive benefits from the work performed by the service learners (Butin, 2003; Heart 2006).

Traditional Service-Learning & Social Change

Social change can play a significant role in strengthening the effectiveness of educators practicing in urban schools. Researchers posited that power dynamics can be skewed in environments where the community is the classroom for those entering the community in service; this power imbalance exacerbates the challenges faced by students from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). It is important to note that power dynamics can impact social change outcomes in service-learning projects. According to Cohen et al. (2023), three stakeholder groups are in a

power struggle within traditional service-learning frameworks: university faculty holds power over students and community partners, students hold power over faculty and community partners, and community partners hold power over faculty and students. Each of these stakeholder groups holds some type of power in the traditional service-learning framework over one another. Still, it is easy to notice that the recipient of services is not included in this power dynamic (Cohen et al., 2023).

Jackson and Knight-Manuel (2018) asserted that to impact marginalized students, educators must first increase their sociopolitical development and nurture a mindset of achievement in their students while also increasing their civic awareness. This includes students who receive service from college students enrolled in service-learning programs. According to Jackson and Knight-Manuel (2019), it is also noted that when the educators of students in urban schools are African American, their shared experiences with students of color, be they college service-learning volunteers or students enrolled in urban schools, render them experts, and their expertise can be leveraged as a pedagogical tool that has the potential to catalyze social change for African American male students at all levels.

Traditional Service-Learning & Socio-Emotional Development

While the research has indicated that educators who are knowledgeable and aware of social change is critical to addressing the challenges Black male students experience, another component in supporting their positive experiences is ensuring that their educators have examined and developed their socio-emotional intelligence and are aware of their emotions as they experience new environments for the first time (Cohen et al., 2023; Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2018). According to Connor and Erickson (2017),

service-learning is an experience that can potentially impact a student's sense of empathy; this developing sense of empathy results in a decrease in feelings of prejudice towards marginalized students; additionally, the authors emphasized that it is expected that White students may experience a new and heightened awareness of social change and a new willingness to embrace it (Connor & Erickson, 2017). This new awareness of social change experienced by White students contrasts with Black men of color, who have lived experiences and firsthand knowledge that is shared with the recipients of their service-learning volunteerism, which motivates them to want to participate in service-learning programs that center their communities in service (Pearl & Christensen, 2017)

The desire to do good and give back to benefit all is an emotional motivation for students less experienced with social injustice to involve themselves in service-learning (Mortari & Ubbaili, 2021). This can be an altruistic goal when college students are not properly prepared to enter communities facing socioeconomic challenges, thus making it imperative that traditional service-learning frameworks include opportunities for students to properly process their emotions to leverage them for a deeper understanding of the communities in which they serve (Carson & Domangue, 2013). Ensuring this safe space for college students greatly benefits them and the recipients of their service-learning volunteerism.

Adaptations towards a social change mindset in students enrolled in service-learning programs enable programs to better align with social justice outcomes. According to the research, embedding critical pedagogy into service-learning can potentially center social justice in service-learning programs (Hart, 2006; Robinson,

2000). To assist students in processing their experience through a social justice and social change lens, Pratt and Danyluk (2017) recommended providing opportunities for students to critically reflect on their service-learning program experiences. Additionally, supervising faculty must provide college students with privileges and minimal understanding of the communities they will serve through service-learning opportunities to narrow the knowledge gap related to marginalized communities (Pratt & Danyluk). Preparing college faculty to recognize the need to shift power dynamics to include the voices of marginalized college students and those receiving services in service-learning initiatives narrows the socioeconomic knowledge gap. It supports students through the emotional challenges some face when participating in service-learning programs (Resch & Schrittesser, 2021).

Critical Service-Learning

In 2008, Mitchell published a study comparing critical and traditional service-learning literature. The author concluded that the critical approach to service-learning is service-learning focusing on social justice. Weah et al. (2000) noted that traditional service-learning needs to evolve to include components that recognize the value of the members of the communities where service-learning is implemented, as opposed to the traditional framework that commonly omits the value brought to the experience by the recipients of service, especially those of color.

Research demonstrated that traditional service-learning is centered on the experience of the White, socioeconomically advantaged college student working with individuals from marginalized communities that are demographically majority people of

color and socioeconomically challenged (Mitchell et al., 2012). Bocci (2015) reinforced the understanding that historically, service-learning has been situated and centered in Whiteness, which prioritizes White people developing, leading, and being responsible for setting norms and standards based on their privileged experience while omitting the voice of people of color living in those communities served. Further, Bocci (2015) indicated that in service-learning, race plays a significant role because the set standard by which everything is measured is Whiteness or the enforcement of norms developed for the benefit of White people. Examining the intersections among social groups through a historical lens is a fundamental aspect essential for redistributing power, as it facilitates the introduction of diverse perspectives and fosters comprehension of these multifaceted interactions (Hayes & Cuban, 1996; Lalueza & Macias-Gomez-Estern, 2020).

Butin (2005) described the attitudes, beliefs, and privileges that many White and socioeconomically advantaged college students bring into their service-learning volunteering assignments as the underside of service-learning. For service-learning to be the transformative experience described by faculty, the deficit-based perspectives about the communities served must be addressed; critical service-learning is a way to do so (Butin, 2005).

Shifting the Narrative to a Critical Approach

Hart (2006) indicated that change must occur at the institutional level to change the dialogue around service-learning centered on Whiteness and reducing community members to passive recipients. Scheffelaar et al. (2023) noted that colleges and universities can address biases and prejudice as part of the necessary transformative

property of service-learning by ensuring that students engage in topics and experiences that develop and grow their social and civic understandings related to the communities in which they serve. Service-learning runs the risk of embodying a pedagogy of whiteness, unintentionally reinforcing deficit thinking by perpetuating a dominant narrative centered around the perspective of the White middle class (Lee et al., 2023). Focusing on providing access to coursework and experiential learning through service-learning that exposes college students who share racial, cultural, and socioeconomic experiences with the recipients of social justice focused curriculum so that they are well prepared to push back on inequities when serving in communities that mimic their communities of origin (Lee et al., 2023). These students will be able to leverage what they have learned to agitate the status quo in their communities and will be able to challenge the mindset that these communities lack members with the skill, knowledge, or experience to contribute to positive social change (Mitchell et al., 2012). Both Bruce and Brown (2010) and Mitchell (2008) maintained that to disrupt old structures that contribute to inequity and imbalance in power between service learners and the communities they serve, faculty and university students must expend significant efforts in developing relationships with community members and other community organizations with knowledge of those served.

Community Voice

An approach to ensure that the community's voice is included in all aspects of service-learning is for faculty, students, and community organizations to collaborate during each phase of a service-learning program, from planning to implementation (Waren-Gorden et al., 2020). Granting agency to college students to actively participate

in developing service-learning projects by engaging with social issues facilitates the cultivation of a heightened sense of empathy toward the community served (Soslau & Gartland, 2022). This process also fosters the establishment of critical relationships within the community. Such exploration enables students to shift their perception of the served population from helplessness and resource scarcity to recognizing their inherent assets within their communities (Butin, 2005; Mitchell, 2008). Consequently, service-learning serves as a platform for students to advocate for the empowerment of the served community, facilitating their exercise of agency (Hayes & Cuban, 1996).

Community-based organizations (CBOs) often enter relationships with universities to establish a pipeline of service learners whose service benefits the CBO by providing a consistent volunteer pool with members who can become the organization's advocate long after the service-learning experience ends (Blouin & Perry, 2009). The authors also indicated that college students who participate in service-learning are likely to become so entrenched in the organization's work that they either continue their volunteer service or even work for the CBO (Blouin & Perry, 2009). While there are positive benefits of service-learning, there are also challenges in the relationship between universities and CBOs. For those organizations working with the most vulnerable populations, it can be devastating to those being served when volunteers stop coming. One of the major complaints of organizations partnering with universities in service-learning is that often, college students are not held accountable by their professors when they do not show up and are not held accountable by the CBO hoping to maintain the relationship for the benefit of those served (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Chang, 2015).

Inclusivity is paramount to implementing a critical service-learning program. All stakeholders should be included in the program's planning and implementation to ensure that the benefit of the service-learning initiative is shared by college students and those they serve.

Community Partners

Critical service-learning requires universities to collaborate with outside entities and community partners such as school districts, hospitals, and CBOs. When community partners work with university service-learning programs, traditionally, the university faculty and students carry out most of the planning and implementation (Warren-Gordon et al., 2020). This traditional approach to service-learning neglects to provide students with the foundational knowledge and skills to develop relationships within the community that are the underpinnings of social change (Mitchell, 2008).

College and university faculty should create inclusive critical service-learning programs where inclusiveness is also extended to community partners, especially organizational leaders who can ensure that the community's voice and needs are considered (Sengupta et al., 2020). Additionally, by creating space for CBOs in all parts of the service-learning program, college students of color and members of the community served are revered as experts and able to assume leadership roles either within the service-learning program or, in the future, within the community; doing so will interrupt the pedagogy of whiteness that is a hallmark of traditional service-learning models (Dillon et al., 2018).

Critical Service-Learning and Social Issues

The segregation and impoverishment prevalent among marginalized community members are symptoms of societal issues examined by students involved in critical service-learning (Saavedra et al., 2023; Irwin & Foste, 2021). Approaching these issues by prioritizing the needs of the marginalized community above those of the service learners is a critical service-learning approach that can potentially elicit social change; however, this approach still centers the work around the life and needs of the majority white and middle class service learner deployed to marginalized communities inhabited predominantly by ethnic minorities (Endres & Gould, 2009).

Continuing with the traditional framework of service-learning, White service learners are placed in positions of leadership, authority, and superiority while relegating minority students to the inferior position of recipient (Irwin & Foste, 2021). This power dynamic is problematic and can be addressed by requiring service learners to engage with content on the history between themselves and marginalized communities, which can help disrupt the imbalance in power distribution within service-learning programs (Sterk Barrett & Jenkins, 2018). Disrupting the power dynamic can also reposition college students of color as leaders within the service-learning experience. Their professors and peers recognize them as community experts based on their lived experiences (Sterk Barrett & Jenkins, 2018). Finally, shifting the perspectives of White service learners about the communities they serve by exposing them to the history between them can help ensure that the service learners build the kinds of relationships in the community that can

spark increased participation by community members and impact for the community and the service learner (Irwin & Foste, 2021).

Critical Service-Learning Pedagogy

According to Hart (2006), critical service-learning pedagogy differs from traditional service-learning pedagogy because it goes beyond the connection between the curriculum and organized volunteer activities by encouraging students to transform their idea of service to one that considers the social and political implications of their actions. Service-learning intends for all involved, including the service recipient, to take part in developing the service to be implemented in the targeted community (Hart, 2006; Naude, 2015). However, critical service-learning expands the framework of traditional service-learning by magnifying the socioeconomic issues that create the need for service-learning initiatives (Mitchell, 2007; Robinson, 2000). Critical service-learning emphasizes the impact of oppression in the lives of marginalized populations when students explore power dynamics and socioeconomic inequities to pursue actions that could help to resolve those issues (Bruce & Brown, 2010; Freire, 2014). If approached critically, service-learning could redefine volunteerism and move it from charitable work that focuses on the service learner to empowerment work centered on the communities served (Hart, 2006). Finally, service-learning in the traditional framework explores the identities of those served; in contrast, critical service-learning requires students to engage in self-exploration and the exploration of power dynamics existent in systems that serve people.

A college student's education should prepare them by providing the edict and resources to practice liberation from oppression for themselves and those they serve,

which, according to Freire (2014), requires the development of critical consciousness that can be obtained by participating in critical service-learning. Additionally, students must possess intimate knowledge of the community in which they will serve, further highlighting the power of critical service-learning as a means for students who share lived experiences with those who serve to develop the skills for liberation within their community of origin (Bringle, 2017; Freire, 2014).

Critical Service-Learning Pedagogy & Identity

Examining identity within a critical service-learning context is essential, considering that critical service-learning explores the power dynamics between college students and the recipient communities they serve (Goldberg & Atkins, 2020). Language can frame a community's identity and create false narratives about the community receiving service. Critical service-learning underscores the detrimental implications of deficit language, such as underprivileged or at risk, which reinforces stereotypes, particularly those about communities of color (Mitchell, 2012). Conversely, the stereotype for service learners is that they are middle class, white and privileged students who feel that they need to help save communities of color (Anzaldua, 1987; Mitchell, 2008). When college students are not required to examine the root causes of the social issues plaguing the marginalized communities targeted by their service-learning programs, these fixed identities assigned to the service learner and the recipient become problematic, and the service learner with privilege maintains the power (Brown, 2001). These fixed identities are also reinforced by divisive borders that maintain the segregation between volunteers and recipients of volunteer service and reinforce role

assignments that relegate community members to passive recipients (Anzaldua, 1987; Bruce & Brown, 2010).

Old narratives must be disrupted to alter the discourse from traditional to critical service-learning and to evolve the fixed and often stereotypical identities of service learners and community members. Colleges and universities are afforded access to communities to provide opportunities for their students and engage members of CBOs in service-learning initiatives (Mitchell, 2008). Although community members in communities served hold valuable knowledge and resources, when the focus is directed only on their needs, their value is overlooked, and the focus remains directed on the college student who is not a member of the community and likely would not engage with the community outside of the service-learning experience (Mitchell, 2008). Reducing the community members to passive recipients and devaluing their knowledge and lived experience as a resource while elevating the value of the university, faculty, and students must be challenged to establish collaborative relationships that have the potential to demolish oppressive power dynamics (Bruce & Brown, 2010; Mitchell, 2008).

Critical Service-Learning in Urban Schools

While Freire (2014) developed a theory for the empowerment of the marginalized that championed their evolution from passive recipients through the acquisition of knowledge, critical service-learning programs may still center the college student who lacks the acumen for critical engagement within marginalized communities. For a service-learning initiative to be considered critical, it must include a social justice component. According to Tinkler et al. (2019), the increasing diversity of America's

schools presents increased opportunities for teacher candidates to work with students who are different from themselves and members of marginalized communities. Participating in critical service-learning programs provides these candidates with the coursework and critical service-learning volunteer experience to strengthen their ability to readily engage with diverse populations in a way that empowers them and has the potential to impact social change by also empowering members of the community served (Tinkler et al., 2019).

Service-learning courses should be sure to expose college students to the potential positive and negative outcomes of service-learning, and courses should prepare service learners for their service-learning experiences as well as ensure that the community members served are highlighted. According to Kelley and Shore (2021), students immersed in urban communities for a service-learning project experienced many situations and emotions related to their service-learning experiences, some positive and some negative. Some notable negative experiences/emotions identified are uncertainty, frustration, pressure, and worldview disruption, and some notable positive experiences/emotions identified are job satisfaction, relationship development, hope for the future, and a shift in worldview from the stereotypical to the identity of the communities served to one where community members are viewed as a part of the solution to the pressing issues they face (Kelly & Shore, 2021). Critical service-learning pedagogy in urban schools has the potential to knock down the pillars of traditional service-learning that mutes the voices of communities of color and communities facing poverty and economic instability and, instead, transposing their identity to that of

empowered and centrally involved in the change needed in their communities (Mitchell, 2012).

African American Men and the Tradition of Service

This study aims to explore the lived service-learning volunteer experiences of educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males. Anzaldua (1987) discusses the experience of crossing cultural and socioeconomic borders that exist between communities. When applied to service-learning, the transformation of student and community identity that occurs through service-learning helps individuals involved in service initiatives to develop a sense of knowing that could potentially disrupt inequity (Tinker et al., 2018). African American male students who come from communities of origin with similar attributes to communities served in service-learning programs, in a sense, cross community boarders as service learners (Anzaldua, 1987). To examine the service-learning experience of educators in urban schools who identify as African American and male, it is helpful to understand the tradition of service amongst African American men in their communities.

Rasheed et al. (2003) discussed the tradition of service in the African American community and indicate that the tradition was born from the disenfranchisement and alienation of the African American community from the systems that should have served them and met needs that were symptomatic of their isolation and segregation from the White population and their everyday privileges and luxuries. Mattis et al. (2000) noted that while the African American male is closely examined in social science research, it is

often from the deficit lens and rarely recognizes their value and contributions to positive social change within their communities.

African American men are influenced to volunteer by variables other than socioeconomic indicators, such as income and education; African American men are more likely to be influenced by factors such as communalism, religiosity, and level of church involvement (Mattis et al., 2000). Of the three, communalism is most significant as it has shown to be a catalyst for prosocial behaviors amongst African American men who display qualities such as liberalism, generosity, and a sense of obligation for the wellness of the whole community; communalism is a cultural orientation of the African American community that emphasizes social bonds and relationships (Mattis et al., 2000).

African American Men and Social Capital

Social capital refers to enhancing individual productivity through social connections encompassing elements of a person's social existence, such as networks, norms, and trust, which facilitate collaborative efforts toward common goals (Hampton, 2010). Bristol (2010) asserted that cultural and social capital positively impact the career development of African American men. Despite research findings indicating the positive implications of access to social capital, Hampton (2010) indicated that when placed in volunteer programs with their White male peers, African American males benefit least, and White males benefit most from social capital accessed in volunteer settings. This phenomenon is explained as covert racism that occurs through the upholding of

traditions, norms, and customs that maintain systemic oppression within the volunteer experience (Coates, 2008).

While African American men are keenly aware of their position as racial minorities, they are also understanding of the implications of racism on themselves and their communities and feel the weight of the responsibility of the overall wellness of those communities (Ornelas et al., 2009). Research indicated that African American men see the church as one of the most significant sources of social capital for themselves; also important is the intergenerational mentoring of other African American men to provide role modeling, the transfer of knowledge and wisdom, access to resources and to encourage other African American men to act (Ornelas et al., 2009).

African American Men and Cultural Capital

Parental support is a form of cultural capital that is often considered the norm within White privilege and lacking within Black families; however, research shows that when African American males enter college, they are beneficiaries of a supportive parental network that, while understudied, exists (Smith, 2022). This network of support for Black males includes relatives or others who are members of the network as an extension of traditional familial bonds (Smith, 2022). Cultural capital comes in many forms; Smith (2022) identifies the following categories: navigational capital, resistant capital, aspirational capital, familial capital, and social capital, all of which direct, inform, or instruct African American men pursuing college educations making their success more likely. When African American male college students participating in critical service-learning are deployed to marginalized communities where they share racial and cultural

experiences with those served, the service recipients gain direct access to the social and cultural capital of the volunteer.

Service and the Historically Black College and University

Blankson et al. (2015) examined service-learning among Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) students. They found that service-learning has a significant role in heightening students' awareness of civic action, politics, and social justice. Highlighting the communal aspects of African American culture, Blankson et al. (2015) indicated that the individual values held by African American students often align with HBCUs' institutional missions. HBCUs, like the African American church, are time-tested stanchions of the community whose standards are upheld by members and illustrated through mission based goals that serve as guideposts for students developing a sense of civic responsibility to their communities (Blankson et al., 2015). Further, Zygmunt et al. (2018) suggested that it is critical to understand the value of volunteering amongst African American students and that volunteering is a strength of the African American community despite deficit narratives that indicate otherwise.

Decolonizing Service-Learning Curriculum

Issues with traditional service-learning and critical service-learning that disproportionately negatively impact the service-learning opportunities for African American students could be addressed by decolonizing the curriculum, according to Yep and Mitchell (2017). Doing so has the potential to remove Eurocentric values that are accepted as the norm and redefine normative values as those of the communities served; recentering the recipient community moves the action from traditional to a more critical

framework that is most suitable for justice initiatives and social change (Yep & Mitchell, 2017). Ajani (2023) argued that curriculum can be decolonized by restructuring the preservice curriculum to include opportunities for college students to reflect on the diverse communities served. Additionally, a social justice focus includes challenging deficit narratives about the recipient community and increasing knowledge and empathy regarding issues faced by marginalized communities (Ajani, 2023).

The fundamental basis of service-learning is education, which should foster a greater awareness of the ongoing obligation to dismantle systemic oppression (Dillon et al., 2018). Failing to recognize educational experiences derived from diverse contexts and traditions perpetuates the dominance of traditional Eurocentric ideologies within service-learning initiatives, further marginalizing African Americans and their values and beliefs (Kennedy et al., 2020). Murphy and Rasch (2008) underscored the importance of undertaking service-learning as an attempt to disrupt systems of oppression if the attempt is to move away from service-learning steeped in the tradition of colonization. Payne (2007) suggested that the emphasis is taken off the service learner and shifted to the community members and receiving service. Repositioning the roles of community members to empowered participants in solving community issues is a social justice, empowerment approach to service-learning most likely to lead to sustainable social change.

Educators' Role in Service-Learning

In the United States, research indicated that there is an epidemic of under-educating Black male students. From K-12 to postsecondary education, the US education

system has failed Black males by enabling conditions for their academic decay (Warren et al., 2016). Former President of the United States, Barack Obama began an initiative called My Brother's Keeper to give voice to young men of color and acknowledged that African American male students are facing some the most unrelenting and harsh obstacles of any other demographic group in the United States in this century (Warren et al., 2016).

Historically, African American male students have been approached from a deficit perspective. Chambers and Spikes (2016) asserted that it is critical to consider the institutional factors that impact African American students, which are traditionally viewed as deficits on the part of the student, the family, and their community. The authors indicated that most often, there is no accountability on the part of the institution or the educators to adapt these institutional factors in ways that will promote student learning (Chambers & Spikes, 2016). Educational institutions replicate and uphold deficit thinking and the undereducation of Black males by sustaining and maintaining prevailing dominant oppressive structures within those institutions (Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Pratt & Danyluk, 2017; Davis & Museus, 2019). Students of color forfeit positive outcomes in education that have the potential to shape their futures because of deficit thinking that shapes the narratives and mindsets of educators about students of color (Annamma & Morrison, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Davis and Museus (2019) indicated that innovation in education can disrupt dominant oppressive systems that stigmatize students of color; service-learning is an innovative strategy that gives students access to opportunities to participate in

educational activities that increase their civic participation (Blankson et al., 2015; Celio & Dymnicki, 2011; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). Research indicated that educators providing service-learning program access to students of color increases student empowerment and self-efficacy. (David & Museus, 2019; Gonsalves et al., 2019; Pearl & Christensen, 2017). Educational instruction can change in a way that benefits Black male students by shifting the deficit focus of students, their families, and their communities and holding educators and education institutions accountable for addressing conditions that create environments where Black male students are undereducated.

Racial Matching and Service-Learning

As has been discussed, African American male students are engulfed in a struggle to thrive resulting from deficit thinking about the population to which they belong, underrepresentation in education, undereducation, and the myriad of challenges created by limitations imposed by systems of oppression, all of which prevent them from experiencing opportunities to engage with educators that share their racial and cultural identity and lived experiences. Systems of education must be able to address the challenge of meeting the needs of a full spectrum of diversity in race, ethnicity, intellectual ability, and socioeconomic status; when it comes to the needs of African American students, those needs become even more nuanced and pervasive (Mungo, 2017). The research demonstrated that service-learning increases graduation rates and increases the GPAs for African American students; however, the author noted that lack of access to cultural capital prevents students of color from accessing and participating in the service-learning experiences that could close the achievement gap for African

American college students (Mungo, 2017). More African American students enrolled in service-learning programs could mean more African American college students available to deploy to marginalized communities to work in schools, providing these students with opportunities to engage with educators who share their racial and cultural identities and experiences.

Culturally Relevant Care for African-American Students

African American male students are rarely celebrated for the positive contributions they make to their communities; instead, African American male students are often judged by the life challenges they face (Watson, 2016). When students are valued based on their positive characteristics rather than judged for the negative circumstances from which they come, they may develop a sense of belonging when they engage with their communities of origin as volunteers (Pak, 2018). Nabors (2019) asserted that when students assume the role of teacher through service-learning, they are involved in self-help by serving others, connecting with their own experiences, and understanding the experiences of those they serve, thereby preparing them to enter their communities as leaders. This type of volunteer service can expose college students to experiences that heighten their awareness of their own needs for care in education and the need for them to reciprocate such care when working with students from marginalized communities like their own (Nabors, 2019).

Watson et al. (2016) proposed that culturally relevant care (CRC) humanizes African American male students by focusing on their inherent power and ability to succeed in their lives and academic pursuits. Culturally relevant care can be identified by

acts of love demonstrated between the service learner and the student they serve; these acts of love are made possible through relationships enabled by the shared experiences and understandings of the service learner and their students (Watson et al., 2016). When discussing love, romantic love is often the topic; however, Natividade et al., (2022) discovered 29 attributes of five types of love. The type of love referenced as an act of love in a service learning environment could be described by the attributes care, giving, support, and education, which, according to the authors, do not reside in one specific category, but overlap between the love types Friend, Filial, and Parental (Natividade et al., 2022). Oord (2005) defined love for research purposes as intentional acts that address the needs of others from a sympathetic perspective and is the same type of love referred to as agape by Carvalho and Mulla (2023). Based on these definitions, agape is demonstrated by service-learning volunteers when they are able to deliver culturally relevant care to the students who are recipients of their service. Bass (2020) indicated that African American men are not viewed as having the capacity to care; however, to the contrary of this bias, research has found that African American men not only care but care deeply based on their prior experiences as men within African American culture. Additionally, the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of African American men diminishes their level of care when observed by others. Engaging more African American male students in service-learning can expose them and others to the level of care experienced by African American males that is often misunderstood, misrepresented, and omitted from their stories.

Summary and Conclusions

Volunteering is complex, multifaceted, and a pivotal civic activity that provides numerous benefits, such as improved health, increased social capital, and enhanced skills and opportunities. However, the volunteer's race and socioeconomic status often influence the benefits acquired or whether a person volunteers at all. Predominantly, volunteers are from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and are well-educated, typically identifying as White, but also sharing those characteristics across race. In contrast, African American volunteers frequently engage in informal volunteering within their communities, primarily through faith-based organizations, thus contributing significantly but often remaining undocumented and underrecognized.

Critical service-learning is a transformative pedagogical approach that moves beyond traditional service-learning by emphasizing social justice and addressing power imbalances. Traditional service-learning often centers on the experiences of White, socioeconomically advantaged students, which can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Critical service-learning, however, seeks to deconstruct these power dynamics, promoting a more inclusive and equitable foundation to leverage marginalized communities' contributions and experiences. It is imperative to highlight the importance of involving community voices in the planning and implementation of service-learning projects. Involving community voices encourages the genuine collaboration necessary to develop a service-learning program celebrating empowerment. Ultimately, revisioning and reshaping service-learning creates a tool for students and faculty to impact social change and justice.

African American male college students are underrepresented in service-learning programs, which creates a gap in research and helps to sustain the achievement gap for African American male college students. The lack of participation among these students means they miss out on the benefits of service-learning, such as developing leadership skills, acquiring social capital, and engaging deeply with their communities. It must be emphasized in academic circles that service-learning programs need to be inclusive and tailored to engage African American male students, recognizing their unique cultural and social experiences. Addressing this gap is crucial for leveraging the potential of service-learning to foster empowerment, civic engagement, and educational success among African American male college students. While students receiving the service of service-learners can also benefit from exposure to educators who share their racial and cultural identity and experience, if college students who identify as African American males do not participate in service learning, not only does the potential service learner miss opportunities, so too does the recipient of service.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Traditional service-learning pedagogy and the service-learning experiences of the typical predominantly White and middle-class service learners have been central in service-learning research (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Shabazz & Cooks, 2022). However, there is limited research centered on the service-learning experience of atypical service learners, specifically those who identify as African American males who may be classified as socioeconomically challenged or disadvantaged and are members of the target communities of service-learning and serving as educators in urban schools. This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to examine the service-learning experience of educators who self-identify as African American males in urban schools.

Research indicated that transitioning from traditional service-learning to critical service-learning pedagogy can shift service-learning programs to engage more African American male students (Bringle, 2017). I aimed to pose questions to the participants to answer research questions about their lived experience with service-learning as self-identified African American men. In Chapter 3, I explain in detail the purpose of using the in-depth qualitative interview method to explore the service-learning experiences of participants. I also outline recruitment and data collection methods and analysis procedures. Finally, the ethical considerations associated with the role of the researcher, participant confidentiality, and participant rights are discussed.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of educators who self-identify as African American males in the context of volunteerism and service learning. A series of

research questions are designed to uncover how this group of educators narrate and describe their lived volunteer experiences and the intersection with their identities as experts and leaders in their communities of origin. Understanding the multidimensional aspect of these experiences is critical because it better describes the sociocultural dynamics of volunteerism and the personal impacts on the lives and experiences of educators who are self-identified African American males in urban schools. I used an asset-focused lens instead of a deficit lens when analyzing the themes around self-identified African American male educators, volunteerism, and identity, intentionally highlighting how this population recounts and articulates their lived experiences with service and service-learning.

The questions that guide the study are as follows:

RQ 1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

RQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

SQ2: How do educators identifying as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

Research Design and Rationale

While determining the most suitable design for this study, I chose a generic qualitative inquiry using semistructured, open-ended questions (see Creswell & Creswell,

2018). Initially, this approach appeared straightforward and sufficient to achieve the study's objectives. However, as I progressed, I recognized the need for a tool to accommodate the depth and intricacies of the personal, intimate, intense, and multi-layered experience inherent in service and service-learning volunteering. Considering the complexities the target population faces during their educational pursuits and daily lives, the study required a method enabling comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences at different life stages.

In this phenomenological study, I recruited five participants who self-identify as African American males and work in urban schools to participate in a series of interviews where they discussed their lived experiences and connection to service and service-learning volunteering. The study was more comprehensive by using in-depth qualitative interviews, enriching the data captured using qualitative research methods (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sideman, 2019). The use of in-depth qualitative interviews allows in detail, providing insight into how they perceive, process, and understand service and service-learning volunteering (Moustakas, 1994).

During three different interviews with each participant, the in-depth qualitative inquiry allowed me to pace the interviews strategically, leaving ample space for the participants to process and answer questions that may cause them to revisit triggering experiences that are unpleasant and could cause difficulty for the participant to answer the questions posed (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, multiple interviews allowed me to ask clarifying questions and to ask participants to expound answers to previous questions and allow the participant to describe their lived experiences fully (see

Gronenwald, 2004). The phenomenological methods emphasizes the importance of capturing the narratives of participants, which allowed amplification of the subtleties of their lived experiences with service and service-learning (see Van Manen, 2021). Also, the research indicated that the emphasis on the role of the researcher as co-creator in collaboration with the participant in a phenomenological study is a great benefit when seeking an understanding of the complexities that exist at the intersection of social standing and education for African American male educators (Thorburn & Stolz, 2021).

As mentioned, Sideman's (2019) three-step in-depth qualitative interview process, in which the researcher guides participants through reflective conversations, reconstructing and emphasizing the meaning of their lived experiences, was employed. By exploring the lived service-learning volunteer experiences of the study participants, this study proposes to assess the lived experience of African American men working in urban education with service and service-learning volunteering. The in-depth interviewing prioritizes participants' lived experiences and allows the participants to assign meaning to the significance of those events (Sideman, 2019). This method aids the researcher in grasping a participant's experiences from their perspective. It allows the participants to narrate their experience across three interviews, bringing them into the research process as a partner with the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The in-depth qualitative interview method worked well with a postintentional phenomenological study because of the depth of information the repeated interview process can provide. According to Vagle (2021), postintentional phenomenologists understood that phenomena can exist, disappear, reappear, evolve, and transform within

the process of a qualitative inquiry. With this understanding, in-depth interviewing was selected as the data collection methodology because of the numerous opportunities to examine how phenomena appear within the confines of the study and how they connect the participants' lived experiences and the phenomena themselves (Vagle, 2021). As a researcher, the in-depth qualitative interview within a postintentional phenomenological study exploring the service-learning experiences of urban educators who self-identify as African American and male appealed to me because this method of inquiry allows multiple opportunities for the researcher and the participants to explore the many layers that contribute to the experiences of being African American and male, an urban educator and with service.

Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, my initial focus was reflexivity or consideration of my past experiences with the research subject and how those experiences may shape my interpretation of the data (see Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). I focused on the service-learning volunteering category, a pedagogy implemented in collegiate coursework to provide students with opportunities to connect the classroom and the real world through structured volunteer experiences (see Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Given my background in community-based and school-based volunteering but limited prior experience, specifically with service-learning, I approached this study with a fresh perspective that helped mitigate potential biases related to the types of volunteerism I am more familiar with. This approach aligned with the principle of epoché in

phenomenological research, where the researcher consciously sets aside preconceptions to authentically interact with participants' experiences (Van Manen, 2021).

My connection to the experiences of African American males, including being a parent of two young adult males in college and mentoring young men through AmeriCorps and urban school partnerships, necessitated a careful balance. It was crucial to remain aware of how my views on the treatment of African American male students in higher education could influence the research. This awareness was essential to prevent my perspectives from skewing the data collection and analysis (see Tuffour, 2017).

Establishing rapport with participants was essential during the data collection phase to facilitate open and honest dialogue. Employing effective interviewing techniques that promoted trust and encouraged participants to share their in-depth experiences allowed me to establish the necessary rapport. Also, my familiarity with the urban education context can be advantageous in building rapport, but it was crucial to maintain a professional distance to ensure objectivity (Seidman, 2019). Finally, the researcher played a critical role in the data analysis phase. This phase involved coding, categorizing, and synthesizing data to uncover themes reflecting the participants' lived experiences. The researcher remained reflective and continuously checked for biases to ensure the findings accurately represented the participants' perspectives (Mueller, 2019). This rigorous analytical process helps to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The intended participant population for the study was educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males. Participants were new educators, veteran educators, or retired educators who were eighteen and over and participated in service-learning as part of their collegiate course requirements if pursuing a degree or career in education. I used social media to recruit participants, relying heavily on LinkedIn, a professional social media site. I posted in groups that target educators who are African American, and I also targeted groups that target educators who are African American men. I also posted on Facebook. The flyers included a description of the study, the criteria for participation, and my contact information (see Minhat, 2015). Once participants agreed to participate in the study, I shared a description of the interview format, the duration of the interview, and available dates and times for interview one. I also confirmed that the participant is willing to participate in three interviews to qualify for the study.

Sampling Method and Rationale

I employed two distinct approaches for participant selection. Firstly, purposeful sampling ensured a deliberate selection of participants meeting specific criteria. As proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), this approach enables the researcher to strategically choose participants, fostering a nuanced understanding of the population and the issues explored in the research questions. Snowball sampling relies on social networking, leveraging established trust between participants and the researcher (Hennick

et al., 2011). While acknowledging potential challenges associated with network dependency, purposeful sampling, as explained by Bryman (2016), was integrated to offset these concerns. The strategic selection process inherent in purposeful sampling aligned with the research questions, ensuring a targeted and diverse representation of the specific population investigated.

Given the scarcity of educators who identify as African American men, an additional strategy was incorporated during the scheduling phase of the first interview. I asked participants to recommend other African American male educators in urban schools for potential inclusion in the study. This process aligns with snowball sampling, where each participant contributes to expanding the participant pool by referring colleagues or former classmates who meet the study criteria and are willing to participate. Defining educators in the context of African American males is critical in determining the inclusion or exclusion of potential candidates. For this research, African-American male educators self-identified as African-American males whose identity included connectedness to racial groups of Africa and whose educational perspectives and approaches were influenced by this identity (Harper & Davis, 2012).

Sample Criteria

Participant inclusion criteria for this study were educators in urban schools who self-identified as African American males and participated in service-learning volunteering in settings where the service learner shared racial, cultural, and socioeconomic identity with the service learner. Participants had to be 18 years and older. The interviews took place in person or via Zoom or other video conferencing platforms

like Skype or Google Meet. I used the platform that best suited the participant to minimize technological obstacles and the location that best accommodated geographic boundaries between the researcher and the participants.

Instrumentation

In this phenomenological qualitative study, I aimed to explore the lived service-learning volunteer experience of educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males. The interview questions were categorized based on the lived volunteer experience and the participants' lived experience with service-learning. Within these categories, questions were focused on self-identity related to volunteer service and service-learning volunteering, African American male representation in education, and the benefits of service-learning volunteering. Participants were asked to reflect on lived experiences through the lens of leadership and civic involvement in their communities of origin and those served through service learning. A complete list of interview questions is provided in the Appendix.

I used Sideman's (2019) in-depth qualitative interview method, requiring three interviews per participant. The first interview assisted the researcher and participant in developing rapport and space for the researcher to ask foundational questions about the participant's background and history with volunteering, reflecting on earlier periods of their lives. The second interview built upon the contents of interview one and further detail specific events shared in interview one. I asked follow-up questions for accuracy, clarity, context, exploration, and expansion.

The third interview provided space for the participant to articulate their lived experiences with volunteering and service-learning volunteering fully. During the third interview, the participants could share any artifacts from their service experiences and service-learning experiences (see Groenewald, 2004). Artifacts can potentially elicit memories, thoughts, or feelings the participant may want to share; artifacts can be pictures, brochures, journals, awards, assignments, or service-learning materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The interviews were semi-structured to guide me and provide some structure; however, during the qualitative, in-depth interview process, the participants and I engaged in conversations about service and volunteering (see Groenewald, 2004). During these exchanges, I became aware of the world from the participants' perspective while the participants constructed meaning and described the essence of the lived experience on their terms (see Cameron et al., 2001; Groenwald, 2004).

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

Before recruiting participants, I obtained Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct a study on three to five human participants, and was assigned this number: 11-15-24-0899577

. Participants were recruited by distributing informational flyers outlining the study's purpose and my contact details. Individuals interested in participating in the study expressed their interest via email or text. Subsequently, I contacted respondents to determine eligibility and to facilitate the informed consent process.

Eligible participants were emailed a scheduling link to a calendar. This link allowed participants to conveniently schedule all three interview sessions according to their availability. Concurrently, individuals who did not meet the study criteria received an email notification expressing gratitude for their interest and time, along with a message informing them that they did not meet the criteria for participation. This streamlined recruitment process ensured clarity and transparency, facilitating efficient participant selection for the study.

Informed Consent

Ethical considerations are paramount in phenomenological research. Ensuring informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and respecting all participants are critical responsibilities. Participants must be fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Cudjoe, 2022). Klykken (2022) described informed consent as an ethical standard fundamental in social research that ensures a participant's decision to participate in or withdraw from a research study is of their own free will and without penalty, and a decision made considering clear and concise information provided by me. The research had to be conducted using formalized practices that consider protecting a participant's freedom during all phases of research and not just during the recruitment phases to protect vulnerable populations from exploitation during the study (see Van Goidsenhoven & DeSchauwer, 2022).

Researchers can ensure that a participant's autonomy is respected and that they are fully informed throughout the research process during a phenomenological study by

adhering to a set of critical steps. First, I prepared documents to obtain informed consent. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), comprehensive informed consent provides study details and outlines the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality, emphasis on voluntary participation, and contact information for the researcher and the IRB; additionally, the document used to obtain consent should be clear and concise in layperson's terms to ensure the participants fully understand what they are about to undertake.

Next, I obtained initial consent before the interviews commenced; gaining initial consent requires a meeting or phone call where the consent form is discussed, and the researcher can answer questions and obtain the participant's signature on the consent form (Moustakas, 1994). Step three was the process of continuous consent. According to Sideman (2019), when conducting phenomenological research using in-depth interviews, a researcher must reaffirm consent throughout the data collection process because profoundly personal and sensitive information that was not outlined when initial consent was obtained can be uncovered. By checking in before each interview session and debriefing at the end, I was able to discuss and resolve any consent concerns the participant may have (Seidman, 2019).

Finally, Step 4 required me to address ethical concerns. Researchers must handle the participants' personal and sometimes sensitive experiences gingerly; by handling participants and their stories with reverence and respect, participants may feel safe and supported when disclosing this information during the research process (Van Manen, 2016). According to Wynn (2018), when working with vulnerable populations, signing

informed consent is akin to signing a contract so that the researcher may encounter suspicion from potential participants. Following these steps ensured I was adhering to best practices in phenomenological research and fostered a sense of openness and trust in the relationship between the participant and me (Van Manen, 2016).

Data Collection

According to Minhat (2015), interviews are most valuable when exploring experiences, perceptions, beliefs, insights, and sensitive issues; the in-depth interview is best suited for this type of research. Using the in-depth interview for this study was well suited for the target audience, composed of men who self-identify as African Americans working in urban schools. Unlike a structured interview, the in-depth interview can be semi-structured, using open-ended questions to leave space for the participants to provide rich experiential data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The use of the semi-structured interview allowed me the freedom to ask more probative questions. However, I developed a list of questions to guide the interview; the flexibility means I did not have to ask the questions in order, and I could ask follow-up or probing questions based on the participant's responses (Bryman, 2011). Additionally, semi-structured questions and flexible interview procedures helped me to identify behaviors and characteristics shared among participants (Bryman, 2011).

My literature review on volunteerism and service in the African American community, the education of African American males, service-learning, and critical service-learning pedagogy helped me to formulate the open-ended interview questions. Additionally, questions were posed regarding the participants' experience with service

within their communities of origin. The interviews began with background questions about their life, family, community, and education at various levels to establish rapport with the participants.

The interview process took place via Zoom. Participants were offered virtual, phone, and in-person options, accommodating geographic boundaries and creating convenience to make it easier for participants to participate in all three interviews. However; all participants opted to complete their interviews via Zoom. When using Zoom, the researcher and participant needed a working camera and kept on during the interview whenever possible. Additionally, I encouraged participants to pre-schedule their interviews. I supplied reminder messages leading up to the second and third interviews to promote attendance in the subsequent interview sessions and allow ample opportunity to reschedule if necessary. A scheduling link was provided so that participants could select from many dates and times for each interview easily without needing to communicate directly with me. With the participant's consent, the sessions were audio recorded in the Zoom platform.

Data Analysis Plan

The use of systematic steps helps to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of African American male educators in urban schools, and by incorporating such steps, I was more likely to develop a solid framework to interpret the data (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2021). I broke the analysis process into three main categories or steps: Transcription, Thematic Analysis, and Coding.

Transcription

According to Seidman (2019), data analysis begins with verbatim transcription; the interview captures the nuances of the participants' responses that indicate nonverbal communication, such as pauses, expressions, and other emotional undertones. Halcomb and Davidson (2006) asserted that accurate interview transcription preserves the subtleties of the narratives, and using technology to automate the process can improve accuracy. Horizontalization, in which every transcribed statement is treated equally, occured once the transcription was complete; horizontalization identified significant phrases or sentences and ensured that all aspects of the experience were considered (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I used Zoom for interviews and transcription.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis allowed me to identify and determine the core themes emerging in the significant statements in the horizontalization process. It allowed me to organize the data, illustrate patterns, and locate the differences and similarities across the participant responses (Flowers & Larkin, 2009). According to Moustakas (1994), bracketing or phenomenological reduction comes next; here, I reread transcripts to highlight my personal biases or perceptions that were present so that the data is the most authentic reflection of the participant's lived experience.

Coding

According to Saldana (2016), coding is a process that happens over several iterations of refinement, ensuring that the results are codes that reflect the data and

associated meanings. Coding is a critical step in analyzing qualitative data, where the data is sorted into meaningful units and assigned codes that represent themes or concepts. I analyzed the data to extrapolate the textural and structural descriptions, which means detailing what the participant experienced during their lived service and lived service-learning volunteer experiences (textural) and the conditions, situations, and contexts that influence their lived service and lived service-learning experiences (structural) (Van Manen, 2021). By synthesizing the structural and textural descriptions within the data, I was able to provide a comprehensive description of the service-learning volunteer experience of urban educators who identify as African American males, which is also known as a composite description of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2021; Rodriguez & Smith, 2019).

I employed technology by using NVivo to conduct data analysis. Using data analysis software helped me organize and code the data efficiently and conduct a deep analysis, which helped me recognize exposed patterns and themes (Woods et al., 2016). Another advantage of using this tool was the ability to provide visualization of the data with charts and models produced by the software (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is critical to validate the study's findings and conclusions. The standard evaluation for trustworthiness in qualitative research is usually done within four categories: credibility, transferability, and confirmability, each of which helps establish rigor and authenticity in the research process and outcomes

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process is particularly useful in ensuring trustworthiness in a phenomenological study and was employed for this study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in qualitative research findings and is parallel to internal validity in quantitative research studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research indicated that there are several techniques that establish qualitative research credibility, which are prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By using in-depth interviews, my engagement with the participants extended beyond just one interview to three interviews over some time, creating a prolonged engagement rather than a one-time interview session. Triangulation occurs when multiple data sources, methods, and/or theoretical perspectives are employed during a research study (Patton, 2015).

I endeavored to achieve triangulation by using in-depth interviews, which provided three distinct data sources for each participant, allowing for both Zoom and in-person interviews, and cross-verifying the findings through the lens of the African American Male Theory. Using the critical lens of AAMT allowed the data to be examined by considering the unique sociocultural dynamics experienced by educators who self-identify as African American male educators in urban schools (Harper, 2019; Smith, 2017).

Finally, allowing the participants to review data at the end of each session enabled member-checking, where they verified the accuracy of how I recorded their lived experiences (Birt et al., 2016). It is critical to note that I allotted time at the end of each

interview for member checking so that it was implemented the same with each participant; this strengthened the validity of the member check itself and the data (Birt et al., 2016).

Transferability

Ravitch and Carl (2019) indicated that transferability requires the acceptance that qualitative research produces context rather than generalizations that can be applied to other populations or studies. Creating thick descriptions fit for comparability to various contexts is what creates transferability in qualitative research (Guba, 1981). Ravitch and Carl (2019) indicated that answering a series of questions about contextualizing participants' lived experiences in the data analysis process will help achieve transferability in the study. I was proactive in regularly answering these questions during the data analysis process; by doing so, I was prepared to identify contextual meaning to research outcomes, thereby helping to achieve transferability and credibility of the study.

Dependability

I conducted three in-depth interviews, over a period of time, with five participants, via Zoom, to conduct this study examining the lived experience of educators who identify as African American males in urban schools. Using these various methods during different phases of the study allowed me to strengthen the stability of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), maintaining a robust documentation of research activities such as challenges, data collection methods, and research reflections, and using consistent coding methods, research studies can be further strengthened. To benefit the study, I maintained a research memo that chronicled the

journey through the writings of Chapters 1 - 3; I also maintain a journal dedicated to documenting the research process from participant recruitment through the final writings. I considered peer debriefing, which would have allowed me to engage in thought partnership with peers willing to give honest and critical feedback to provide checks and balances for the study, further strengthening the dependability of the data. I was able to use regular check-ins with my peers to ask for feedback related to the study. These opportunities provided fresh perspectives to consider throughout the process.

Confirmability

Haven and Van Grootel (2019) stated that the trustworthiness of qualitative research is often under scrutiny. A way to prepare for such scrutiny is to ensure the confirmability of the study by including practices during the research process that support what are considered best practices, such as maintaining journals and maintaining notes throughout the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

According to Finlay (2019), the researcher needs to maintain reflexivity or a continuous reflection of their assumptions, values, and biases, and take care to document those throughout the process, including how they may impact the research process and the outcomes. As mentioned, I maintained journals, memos, and notes throughout the study's various phases to provide the necessary transparency to support the study's confirmability and credibility.

Ethical Procedures

Considering the safety and protection of research participants should be paramount to the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It also must be considered that

qualitative research is conducted with human participants, and with human interactions come ethical considerations; further, implementing ethical standards enhances the credibility of the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

There are many ethical considerations when working with human participants; I focused on the considerations that were most influential when considering research related to individuals who are educators in urban schools and identify as African American males. One ethical consideration I made is protecting participant identity to ensure that anything divulged within the confines of the study was not made public, especially if it could have damaged their public image or professional standing. I also adhered to the professional standards of my professional organization, which is the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS), which states in NOHS Ethical Standard 32: (National Organization for Human Services, 2024)

> Human service professionals engage in research that upholds ethical standards, meets institutional standards, and maintains scientific integrity. Such research accounts for cross-cultural and diversity bias and is reported with transparency regarding its limitations.

My inquiry into participants' lived experiences meant considering that the inquiry could have had a negative impact, which could have elicited a negative response from participants. If this happened, I was prepared to provide the participants with resources to help them mitigate the negative response to the research interview (Finlay, 2019). Also important was adhering to the standards set forth by the American Psychological Association Ethical Principals of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Including 2010

Amendments related to research, which instruct the researcher always to follow the procedure set forth by the Walden Institutional Review Board, be able to articulate the purpose for the study to participants clearly, obtain informed consent, and to be respectful of all cultures represented in the participant pool to name a few (Creswell & Creswell, 2019).

Finally, used relationship-building skills and techniques throughout the process to develop and maintain transparency and trust with the participants. Part of gaining their trust was demonstrating respect for their persons by being protective of them and their personal information and demonstrating empathy and respect as it related to their stories. This is the foundation of strong ethical practice. Ethics is not something that should only be considered once during the study. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), addressing ethical considerations during all phases of the research ensures that ethical procedures are embedded in the study, along with remedies when ethical issues arise.

Summary

Chapter 3 delineates the research methodology employed to explore the lived service-learning experience of educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males through a phenomenological lens. The research questions are discussed because they provided an outline to construct the narratives that describe how this group of educators articulated their lived experiences with volunteerism and service-learning volunteering. The study design was rooted in phenomenological methods and used in-depth qualitative interviews to capture the complex participant experience. The rationale for using this approach was that it provided a way to understand the experience of

African American male educators in urban schools while highlighting the significance of their relationship with service in the context of identity and their roles as community leaders.

Participant selection was detailed, indicating that purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify participants who were a good fit for the study. Critical ethical considerations were addressed, emphasizing informed consent, confidentiality, and the ethical treatment of human participants throughout the study. The in-depth interview data collection method was determined to align with the study's need to allow for a thorough exploration of the participants' lived experiences.

Finally, Chapter 3 discusses the data analysis process, which included transcription, horizontalization, thematic analysis, and phenomenological reduction. Strategies like prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and maintaining a journal were used to maintain reflexivity and enhance the study's trustworthiness. The data collection and analysis processes and procedures discussed in Chapter 3 were aligned with the primary focus for exploring the service learning experience of educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American and male to understand what it means to them to serve children through service learning in their shared racial and cultural community and how service has impacted various facets of their lives.

Chapter 4: Results

In Chapter 4, I report on the qualitative data collected during the study. Experienced African American male educators in urban schools shared their lived experience with volunteering, service, and service learning. In this qualitative phenomenological study, I employed two primary research questions and two sub-questions to explore the participants' experiences with service learning. The following research questions were used:

RQ 1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

RQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

Data collection resulted in 15 transcripts from five participants that I analyzed to expose codes and themes describing the participants' lived experience with service learning volunteering. Five participants were appropriate for the study and fit within the study design to recruit five to eight participants. The five participants seemed anxious to talk about their lived experiences and were very open in their responses. Additionally, the participants each seemed receptive to being guided by the research questions. The

structure of the questions forced the participants to pause to ensure they understood what they were being asked and that they answered the questions in the proper context.

Transcripts were cleaned to ensure continuity across the 15 interviews; this continuity assisted the Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) in the coding process. The cleaning process also served as my first review of the transcripts, where I noticed emerging themes. With the assistance of the NVivo software, data were then coded and analyzed to identify significant codes and themes aligned with the research questions. I then conducted a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with self-identified African American male participants, also assisted by NVivo. I uploaded the interview transcripts into the NVivo software, and ran the autocode feature, which identified codes and themes by their frequency across the full set of interview transcripts. Once the transcripts were autocoded, I reviewed the codes and the transcripts and added codes that were not identified by the software. The NVivo software also assisted with connecting the responses with the research questions. With those two tasks completed, I was able to isolate the themes highlighted in the study.

Setting

Participants had the option to participate in interviews in person, via Zoom, or by telephone; however, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Participating via Zoom ensured accessibility, flexibility, and inclusion of participants across an expanded geographic region. Conducting the interviews via Zoom also empowered the participants to select a comfortable and private environment conducive to sharing their experiences, while also allowing for privacy, secure recording, and transcription. It was preferred that

cameras were on; however, participants had the option to turn the camera on or to keep it off during the interview and were advised that the recordings would be audio only. Only twice did participants opt for the cameras to be off; once was a technical issue, and once to maintain the privacy of their location. The virtual format also provided the flexibility necessary to meet the demands of participants' busy schedules and professional commitments.

Demographics

Five self-identified African American male educators participated in this study, creating a sample of five, each meeting the inclusion criteria and each consenting to voluntarily share their experiences and perspectives through a series of three self-scheduled, in-depth interviews. Participants represented a range of grade levels served in K-12 education. The participants represented four distinct geographic regions across the United States, and years of experience in urban public school settings. Their volunteer engagement varied from faith-based and school-affiliated activities to community service roles and mentoring initiatives.

Participant education experience ranged from four years to over 20 years. The group included Ohio, North Carolina, Texas, and Maryland educators. Volunteer roles were diverse, including military service, coaching, church-based outreach, youth mentoring, and civic engagement such as food distribution and student photography. This diversity contributed to a rich set of narratives reflecting the multifaceted ways these educators connect with and serve their communities.

Although six participants initially consented to be part of the study, Participant 4 was excluded from the final sample. This exclusion was due to a lack of continued participation following the first interview session, during which no usable data were collected for analysis. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of education and volunteer experience and the participants included in the study.

Table 1

Participant Education Experience and Volunteer Engagement

Participant ID	Years in education	Grade level	School setting	Region	Volunteer role(s)
Participant 1	10 years	Upper Elementary, Middle	Urban Public School System	Cleveland, Ohio	Shadow a principal, Cleveland Food Bank, International Women's Day, student teaching/internship
Participant 2	7 years	K–12	Urban Public School System	Johnston Co., North Carolina	Military service, Football coach, Student photographer, student teaching/internship
Participant 3	10 years	K–12	Urban Public School System	Johnston Co., North Carolina	Military service, Adopt-a-Family (holiday baskets), Blessing Boxes, Juvenile Justice support, Church youth volunteer, student teaching/internship
Participant 5	4 years	K–12	Urban Public School System	Houston, TX	Church-based volunteering, Feed the Children, student teaching/internship
Participant 6	20+ years	K–5	Urban Public School System	Baltimore, MD	Military service, Football coach, student teaching/internship

Note: Participant 4 was excluded from the final analysis due to discontinued participation following initial interview scheduling.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited by advertising on Facebook and LinkedIn, advertising through the Walden University participant pool, including my professional networks, and via email, including African American male educators within my network who are not subordinate to me or any network professional sharing the study. I thought that LinkedIn would yield the most responses due to the professional nature of the platform; however, the most fruitful platform proved to be Facebook, specifically the groups for Black educators and Black male educators. Additionally, some potential candidates were referred to the study through snowball sampling that occurred organically when the opportunity was shared via email and then forwarded directly to individuals who may have fit the criteria to be potential candidates. The materials used in the recruitment process included a flyer, a brief study description, and an invitation to those who fit the criteria to share their lived experiences with service learning and volunteerism in urban educational settings. Eligible participants self-identified as African American males who were currently or formerly employed as urban educators and had engaged in service-learning activities directly related to their coursework.

I employed semistructured, in-depth interviews with self-identified African American male educators who met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. Sideman's (2019) in-depth interview process required me to conduct a series of three interviews with each candidate, which allowed me to explore the participants' experiences across various periods of time, across their experiences with volunteering and service learning. The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, opening up accessibility for

participants located across various regions of the United States. The Zoom platform also enabled the privacy necessary to engage in candid conversations while maintaining participant comfort and confidentiality.

Prior to each interview, participants received an email with the consent form attached; the form and email outlined the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality measures, and the participant's right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were asked to respond to the informed consent email with a responding email simply stating, "I consent," in the body of the text. Participants were provided a Calendly link empowering them to schedule sessions at their convenience; interviews ranged from approximately 45 to 75 minutes and did not exceed the 90-minute allotment. All interviews were audio-recorded, with participant permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

If participants neglected to follow the informed consent protocol outlined in the email, they were instructed to do so at the beginning of Interview 1. They were given the option to take time to review the consent form and ask any questions regarding the informed consent form and process. Once the participant indicated they had no questions and were ready to proceed with their consent, I confirmed receipt of the informed consent email, and the interview continued as planned.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions grounded in the central research questions:

RQ 1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

RQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

SQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

The research questions were crafted in alignment with phenomenological research and to encourage the participants to share their experiences. Additional probing questions were used to encourage depth and elaboration of participant responses when necessary. Prior to getting immersed in the interview questions, I used the first few moments of Interview 1 to give the participant some basic background information about me, such as what I am studying, what I do for work, and an interesting fact, like what I like to do on Saturdays. I began with this so that when I asked the participants to tell me a little about themselves before we began, they mirrored most of the information I provided in my introduction. This created ease by eliminating the need for the participant to try to think of things to tell me and prepared them for what to expect to experience during the interview. During this time, I quickly learned some basic background information about each participant before the formal interview began.

While I informed the participants that they may see me taking notes or typing notes during the interview, I only did so to note things that would not be detectable on an audio recording, like body language or facial expressions. Refraining from focusing on

notetaking allowed me to employ active listening well and to be able to ask impromptu probing questions to elicit responses with deeper meaning from the participants.

Six participants initially consented to participate. However, only five completed the full data collection process. Participant 4 was removed from the final sample due to discontinued communication after the initial interview was scheduled; as a result, no usable data were collected from this participant. The final data set included 15transcribed interviews imported into NVivo software for systematic organization and analysis. Each participant was assigned a participant code (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) to preserve anonymity and to maintain the organization of the data.

Ethical Considerations

The dignity, privacy, and rights of participants were major ethical considerations. Before data collection, the study received formal approval from the Walden University IRB. The rigorous process of gaining institutional approval also helped to maintain the integrity of the research process. I took great care to provide the participants with details describing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits by implementing an informed consent process. This consent form was provided electronically and signed by each participant prior to participation. The form clearly communicated that participation was voluntary and instructed participants that they could decline to answer any question, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

I was concerned about maintaining participant anonymity due to the professional roles and potentially sensitive reflections shared by participants. Participants were assigned numbers to code and protect their identities and privacy (e.g., Participant 1,

Participant 2), and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and research records. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all raw data will be securely retained for the period required by institutional guidelines and then destroyed.

No physical, psychological, or social harm was anticipated or reported. Developing a rapport with the participants early on in Interview 1 established the interview sessions as safe spaces. The participants' comfort level with virtual platforms also helped them to be honest and open. Ethical integrity was also upheld in the data analysis and reporting phases. Findings were reported, paying close attention to representing the voices of participants in a manner consistent with phenomenological research, respecting the participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis

In phenomenological research, researchers aim to uncover the essence of lived experience through deep engagement with participants' narratives (Patton, 2015). To align with the goals of phenomenological research, the data analysis process was aided by NVivo qualitative data analysis software, allowing for systematic coding, categorization, and identification of significant statements that support emergent themes. Using NVivo enabled me to manage the large data set captured through the in-depth interview process.

After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, I reviewed each transcript multiple times, ensuring accuracy and creating an opportunity for me to be immersed in the data. Initially, open coding was applied as I began scanning the transcripts, looking for any errors in transcription; I started taking notes and identifying initial codes and

themes. During the process of cleaning up the data and ensuring that each set was formatted the same during this second scan, I began to notice participants using similar phrases as they described their experiences.

Cleaning the data prepared it for upload to NVivo, where the auto code feature was used to generate an initial codebook, which I used and added some of the themes or codes that were not picked up by the software. It was during this third review of the data that I noticed bias in NVivo's interpretation of the data. An example is if a participant used terms like low income, juvenile justice, or mental health, the segment was coded as having negative sentiment, even if the entire statement was positive or neutral, and without negative meaning. I made a note to pay close attention to anything coded as having negative sentiment to ensure that the participant was indeed expressing a negative sentiment. Being immersed in the iterative data analysis process was a combination of working with the collected qualitative data by deconstructing codes, themes, and notes, and allowing them to guide my thematic analysis. Finally, to conduct the thematic analysis, I used NVivo software to assist in organizing themes in alignment with the research questions; I used the identified segments of participant responses to underpin the identified themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

It is imperative that a qualitative study demonstrate trustworthiness to establish integrity, rigor, and value of the study findings, and to give credibility to the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria that must be met in qualitative inquiry for the study to be deemed trustworthy; the criteria for trustworthiness are: credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following subsections describe how these standards were upheld throughout this study.

Credibility

Credibility in a qualitative study refers to the accuracy with which the study illustrates each participant's lived experiences and the internal validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Several strategies were used to enhance credibility in this study, beginning with prolonged engagement using three in-depth interviews per participant. Repeated interaction with each participant deepened the relationship and ensured a more robust understanding of their service-learning and volunteer experiences (see Seidman, 2019).

To support triangulation, data were collected from three interviews per participant. Data were analyzed through the lens of AAMT; employing this framework provided the necessary sociocultural lens required to synthesize participant experiences as self-identified African American males (Bush & Bush, 2013). NVivo software was used to maintain consistency in the analysis.

At the end of the three sessions, member checking was used by checking in with participants to ensure they felt comfortable about what they shared during the interview session. Participants could clarify, update, or expand their responses, and could also express any concerns; this process provided the opportunity for the participant to feel confident that the interview findings would be presented with accuracy and in the voice, tone, and meaning they intended (see Birt et al., 2016). I created a memo, which I used as a journal throughout the research process to document my experience during the study.

Journaling and keeping the memo helped me to remain transparent and accountable to the process I created. This memo was an important tool when making decisions throughout the study.

Transferability

In this study, I addressed transferability in three ways: application, resonance, and theory (see Stalmijer et al., 2024). To address transferability as application, detailed information about the participants, research setting, and the study was provided to be applied in future research or other research settings. A comprehensive demographic table was included to offer readers sufficient context to evaluate the relevance and applicability of findings to similar populations or settings. Using direct quotes and highlighting common themes, address transferability as resonance, because in doing so, readers will be able to identify their connection and understanding of the study based on their personal experience with the subject and contents. Finally, transferability as theory was used when data was analyzed through the lens of the AAMT.

Dependability

Dependability was ensured by using a consistent, repeatable data collection and analysis process. I used a question sheet that ensured the questions were asked in the same order for each participant in the 15 interviews. Also, I compiled interview protocols, consent forms, journal memos, notes, and coding documentation, which provides another layer of dependability. Finally, using NVivo enabled me to systematically store, retrieve, and query data.

Confirmability

Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining researcher reflexivity by documenting my experience and process through an ongoing journal memo. The study's findings were based solely on participant data and themes supported by direct quotations. In vivo coding was used where it was possible to retain participants' language and to identify common experiences amongst the participants. I practiced reflexive journaling to recognize and reduce the influence of my perspectives and to document the process. The systematic use of NVivo also contributed to the integrity of the study.

Data Analysis Results

During the interview process, participants conveyed deeply personal and context-rich reflections on their lived experiences with volunteerism and service learning. These self-identified African American male educators discussed a range of motivations and influences, spiritual values, mentorship received and given, the example of elders in their communities, and their commitment to representing their identities authentically within urban education. Many described service as a spiritual calling, a responsibility modeled by family or community leaders, or a means of reclaiming and reshaping narratives of Black masculinity. Table 2 illustrates the themes and subthemes revealed when participants narrated their service learning experiences.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes

Spiritual calling	- Faith as motivation - Service as a divine obligation - Church influence
Community representation	- Visibility in education - Challenging stereotypes - Advocacy for inclusion
Mentorship legacy	- Giving back - Honoring mentors - Youth guidance
Identity reclamation	- Resisting deficit narratives - Affirming Black identity - Cultural pride
Educator purpose	- Teaching as service - Purpose-driven profession - Alignment of role and mission

Participant Contribution & Thematic Synopsis

In this section, I outline themes that emerged through data analysis and details how participants' narratives contributed to developing and interpreting these themes. Drawing on direct quotations, this section illustrates the lived experiences shared by the participants and the significance they assign to volunteerism and service learning.

RQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

In response to RQ 1, there were three primary themes that emerged, which are: spiritual calling, mentorship legacy, and educator purpose. Often, participants framed volunteerism as an extension of their spiritual values, describing it as a divine obligation or faith-driven mission that is rooted in early religious teachings and family traditions. Spiritual calling was referenced by all five participants and served as a powerful lens for interpreting their commitment to service. The theme of mentorship legacy captured participants' strong inclination to give back as a way of honoring the guidance they

received from community leaders, teachers, coaches, and family elders. These educators indicated through their narratives that mentoring the next generations was not an option but critical to the community and the cultural identity of its members. Finally, the educator's purpose reflected how participants fused their professional roles in education with their personal convictions about service, suggesting that volunteerism was inseparable from their educator identities. These themes are interconnected and illuminate how deeply embedded volunteerism is within the moral, cultural, and professional frameworks of African American male educators. Table 3 summarizes the themes revealed in RQ1 and how the participants contributed to the thematic outcomes.

Table 3

RQ1: Participant Contribution to Thematic Outcomes

Theme	Participants contributed	Theme references in data
Spiritual calling	5	18
Mentorship legacy	4	15
Educator purpose	5	21

RQ1 Thematic Synopsis

Theme: Spiritual Calling Participants described their experiences with volunteerism as a spiritual act that is motivated by family traditions, a sense of faith-based responsibility, and religious teachings.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “Volunteering is ministry for me.”

- P3: “It’s what I was taught – we serve because we were served.”
- P5: “Faith tells me this is part of my purpose.”

Theme: Mentorship Legacy Participants framed volunteerism to honor the mentorship they received when they were youths. Participants emphasized that giving back is a moral duty.

Contributing Quotes:

- P2: “My coach changed my life, so I coach now- give it back.”
- P3: “You don’t forget those who mentored you – you live it forward.”
- P6: “Mentorship is legacy – it’s what we leave behind.”

Theme: Educator Purpose When considering their professions as educators, participants viewed their professional roles as inherently connected to service, interweaving teaching and volunteering together in a unified mission.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “I can’t separate teaching and service – they’re the same.”
- P2: “Being in schools is one kind of volunteering – it’s all connected.”
- P5: “My job is service – plain and simple.”

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

Spiritual calling, mentorship legacy, and identity reclamation are the themes that emerged in response to SRQ1. The participants consistently associated service-learning experiences to faith-based values and cultural norms rooted in their upbringings. These experiences were often framed as meaningful opportunities to give back, not only in

schools, but within broader community spaces where their presence as African American males held significance. Mentorship legacy was highlighted in stories where participants described mentoring youth through coaching, church-based programs, or educational guidance. Meanwhile, identity reclamation emerged as participants reflected on how service learning allowed them to resist narrow social narratives and assert more affirming expressions of their identities as Black men, often connecting these acts of service to personal healing and community representation. Table 4 outlines the themes related to SRQ1 and how the participants contributed to the thematic results.

Table 4

SRQ1: Participant Contribution to Thematic Outcomes

Theme	Participants contributed	Theme references in data
Spiritual calling	4	16
Mentorship legacy	4	13
Identity reclamation	3	9

SRQ1 Thematic Synopsis

Theme: Spiritual Calling Service-learning was described by participants as work that is spiritually guided, and centered at the intersection of faith, community values and professional identity.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “I chose the church project for service learning – it’s who I am.”

- P3: “You don’t separate service from belief.”
- P6: “These kids see it’s not just about school, it's about the spirit too.”

Research Question 2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

Emergent themes for RQ2 were identity reclamation, community representation, and spiritual calling. According to participant responses, volunteering allowed them to resist societal stereotypes and to assert pride in their racial and cultural identities. Participants also strongly challenge and resist deficit-based narratives about Black men and boys. Identity reclamation was defined by participants articulating their definition of what it means to be a Black male educator in shared public spaces connected to service, empowering them to affirm their dignity and capacity. Community representation highlighted the social importance of being visibly present and engaged in their communities, not just as professionals, but as role models serving as a representation of what is possible for Black men and boys. Spiritual calling surfaced repeatedly throughout the interview sessions. Participants linked their identity and value as Black men to motivations linked to their faith-based beliefs and desire to serve others. These themes emphasize the ways that service is not just action but an extension of the participants' identities, self-affirmations, and cultural legacies. Table 5 depicts how participants contributed to the thematic results of RQ2

Table 5

RQ2: Participant contribution to thematic outcomes

Theme	Participants contributed	Theme references in data
Identity reclamation	5	20
Community representation	5	18
Spiritual calling	4	14

RQ2 Thematic Synopsis

Theme: Identity Reclamation By participating in acts of service, participants reclaimed the narratives about Black male identity, challenging stereotypes and affirming their humanity.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “They see a Black man leading in the community – that’s not what the world usually shows.”
- P3: “I serve to prove we are more than what the media says.”
- P5: “Volunteering is a way to tell a different story.”

Theme: Community Representation Participants viewed their visibility and actions in community service as vital symbols of Black men’s leadership, strength, and care in urban settings.

Contributing Quotes:

- P2: “I’m the only Black man some of these kids know – so I show up ever time.”
- P4: “Representation isn’t optional – it’s survival.”
- P6: “When they see us, they believe it’s possible.”

Theme: Spiritual Calling Repeatedly, participants continued to frame their motivation to serve as a spiritual, faith-driven activity, linking their identity to a higher calling and cultural purpose.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “Faith is why I serve. It’s tied to who I am as a Black man.”
- P3: “We’re taught early to give back – it’s in our churches, our homes.”
- P5: “My spirit moves me to serve – it’s not separate from who I am.”

SQ2: How do educators identifying as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

The core themes that emerged for SRQ2 are community representation, mentorship legacy, and cultural affirmation. Engaging in service-learning helped participants declare their cultural heritage and values, allowing them to be highly visible, positive role models in their communities. Community representation was expressed as a sense of duty amongst participants when they were in spaces where they were often underrepresented. They felt that these instances gave them the opportunity to display the positive aspects of Black manhood amongst people who may not have limited experiences and understandings of Black manhood, often biased by negative stereotypes

perpetuated in the media and modern culture. Table 6 delineates the participant contribution to the thematic outcomes represented in SRQ2.

Table 6

SRQ2: Participant contribution to thematic outcomes

Theme	Participants contributed	Theme references in data
Community representation	4	15
Mentorship legacy	3	10
Cultural affirmation	3	9

SRQ2 Thematic Synopsis

Theme: Community Representation Participants continued to express the importance of their visibility in their communities through service learning. These experiences allowed them to dispel stereotypes and provide positive experiences and perspectives of Black male leadership.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “They need to see us doing good, not just in a classroom but out there.”
- P2: “Presence matters. That’s what service is all about.”
- P6: “Even if they don’t say it, they watch. We’re the image.”

Theme: Mentorship Legacy Mentorship legacy encompasses the commitment to guide others through structured service-learning efforts. This legacy is inspired by the participant mentors.

Contributing Quotes:

- P2: “I’m coaching now because somebody did it for me when I needed it.”
- P3: “That’s what real learning is – mentoring through service.”
- P5: “I hope they remember this like I remember my mentors.”

Theme: Cultural Affirmation Participants explained how service-learning kept them connected to their cultural values and cultural pride, helping them to honor their roots and to affirm their identity in a communal context.

Contributing Quotes:

- P1: “Volunteering feels like tradition – it’s how we’ve always survived.”
- P3: “My grandmother was always serving. This just feels right.”
- P5: “Our culture is service – it’s how we love, protect and uplift.”

Summary

In Chapter 4, I shared the findings for the study exploring the lived service-learning experiences of African American male educators in urban schools. I conducted in-depth interviews with five participants, which produced a rich dataset that was analyzed with the help of NVivo software to identify codes and emergent themes. The analysis was guided by the African American Male Theory, providing a culturally grounded lens through which participants’ experiences were interpreted. Across the interviews, several dominant themes emerged, including spiritual calling, mentorship legacy, identity reclamation, community representation, and cultural affirmation.

The outcomes of the study were supported by participants’ direct narratives and organized in alignment with the central research questions and sub-questions. These

themes illuminated the study, highlighting the complex relationships between identity, purpose, and community in the volunteer experiences of African American male educators. The narratives highlighted how service-learning influenced the personal and professional lives of the participants. The narratives also convey how service-learning served as a tool for cultural expression, resistance, and transformation. These findings set the foundation for the next chapter, which will offer an interpretation of results, implications of the study and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I conducted this study to explore the gap in the literature on the service learning experiences of self-identified African American males in urban schools. I aimed to understand the disparities in participation rates in service learning and better understand the beliefs and habits of this group of educators related to how they interpret and integrate acts of service into their personal and professional lives. AAMT provided the conceptual framework for this study, emphasizing the sociocultural contexts and identity constructions of African American males (see Bush & Bush, 2013). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

RQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

SQ2: How do educators identifying as African American males describe their experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

The central focus of this research emerged from the relentless absence of African American male voices in both educational leadership and volunteer service narratives, particularly within structured service-learning environments (Bass, 2020). Semistructured in-depth interviews with five self-identified African American male educators provided qualitative data that revealed key themes, which included spiritual calling, mentorship

legacy, identity reclamation, cultural affirmation, community representation, and educator purpose. These themes were analyzed through the lens of AAMT and offered an understanding of the sociocultural and identity-driven motivations behind their service engagement. In Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of these findings, how they align with existing theory, and the broader significance for practice and future research. Service learning is accepted as a transformative pedagogical approach to engaging and educating college students that merges academic learning with community service, enhancing civic responsibility and cultural engagement (Butin, 2015). However, the voices and experiences of African American male educators within this framework remain largely underexplored.

Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of this section is to contextualize and interpret the study results in response to each research question, using a thematic lens anchored in AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013). Drawing from participant narratives and the literature on culturally responsive education, volunteerism, and identity, this discussion offers a nuanced understanding of how service is deeply interwoven with the professional and personal development of African American male educators.

Research Question 1

RQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

Theme 1: Spiritual Calling

Participants specialized their volunteerism as a spiritual responsibility grounded in cultural and familial values. One shared, “I was raised to believe that serving others is what we’re here for. It’s spiritual—it’s what God wants us to do.” This synthesis of faith and purpose echoes the findings from Herndon (2003), who highlighted that service activities rooted in spiritual communities often foster sustained engagement and identity-building among African American men. In line with AAMT, participants’ narratives reaffirm that spirituality remains a central pillar of identity and community uplift (Bush & Bush, 2013).

Theme 2: Mentorship Legacy

Service was frequently reframed as mentorship—educators understood their roles as evolving from mentees to mentors. As one participant reflected, “I wouldn’t be here without the men who poured into me, so I do the same now.” This mirrors Johnson’s (2017) assertion that intergenerational mentoring is critically tied to cultural continuity among African American males. In line with AAMT, this sense of generational stewardship underscores the importance of mentorship as cultural transmission (Bush & Bush, 2013).

Theme 3: Educator Purpose

For participants, teaching and volunteering were inextricably connected. “My job is service, plain and simple,” one participant stated, framing professional practice as cultural service. This finding resonates with Ladson-Billings (2006) research, suggesting that African American educators frequently view their work through lenses of social

justice and community care. By integrating professional and service missions, participants embody culturally sustaining pedagogy, affirming their roles as both educators and change agents (Bush & Bush, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Subresearch Question 1

SRQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

Theme 1: Spiritual Calling

Participants equated service-learning with moral and spiritual alignment, stating, "When I give back, I feel centered—it's like I'm aligned with something bigger than myself." These findings reinforce the concept of spiritually anchored civic engagement, as articulated by Butin (2005), who emphasized how service-learning allows educators to enact deeply held moral and spiritual values through community-based work. Spirituality continues to serve as a foundational motivator in African American male-identified service (Bush & Bush, 2013).

Theme 2: Mentorship Legacy

Service learning was described as a practicable form of mentorship. One educator explained, "That's what real learning is—mentoring through service," emphasizing how experiential learning can serve as a medium for cultural transmission. This mirrors Ladson-Billings's (2009) findings that culturally relevant pedagogy fosters community-based learning and identity affirmation. Through service-learning, educators operationalize mentorship, translating their lived experiences into community impact, a reflection of AAMT's emphasis on relational leadership (Bush & Bush, 2013).

Theme 3: Identity Reclamation

According to the volunteer narratives, volunteering provided participants with opportunities to change the narrative about who people believe them to be. One participant declared, “Volunteering was my way to rewrite the story society tells about us.” These actions resonate with AAMT’s call for African American males to exercise agency in shaping their narratives (Bush & Bush, 2013). The participants indicate the significance and importance of this is undervalued. Being able to dismantle biases served as a way for these men to give back to those who may be coming after them. It is the hope that they can be seen for who they are and not for the stereotypes that often precede them in their professional and personal spaces.

Research Question 2

RQ2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

Theme 1: Identity Reclamation

Volunteerism emerged as a means for participants to assert and reconstruct their identities. One participant stated, “I serve to prove we are more than what the media says,” symbolizing how service provides space to challenge external narratives. This aligns with the principles of AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013), which emphasized that African American men engage in community action as expressions of identity and resistance, and also echoed Ladson-Billings’s (2009) assertion that culturally relevant practices allow educators to affirm the humanity and potential of marginalized groups. These educators reaffirmed a positive identity and dismantled deficit-based perceptions

of Black masculinity, positioning themselves as empowered role models in their communities.

Theme 2: Community Representation

Visibility in service roles emerged as a powerful mechanism for shaping identity and inspiring future generations. One participant remarked, “Even if they don’t say it, they watch. We’re the image,” highlighting how African American male educators act as symbolic role models through their presence. This observation aligns with Butin’s (2055) discussion of service learning’s potential to make educator identities visible and influential within community settings. It also reinforces African American Male Theory (Bush & Bush, 2013), which emphasizes that positive representation is a key element in identity formation for African American men. Through their leadership in service learning, these educators actively counteract invisibility and broaden the cultural narrative surrounding Black male leadership.

Theme 3: Cultural Affirmation

“Our culture is service; it’s how we love, protect, and uplift." One participant described service-learning as an extension of deeply rooted cultural traditions. This finding aligns with Butin’s (2005) assertion that service-learning supports experiential education and serves as a means to honor and sustain cultural identity through civic engagement. Additionally, AAMT (Bush & Bush, 2013) suggests that African American males engage in culturally grounded actions to reaffirm their identity and collective values. Through their narratives, participants revealed that volunteering was not just a

professional or altruistic choice, but a continuation of ancestral values passed down through generations, anchoring culture at the center of what they do.

Subresearch Question 2

SQ2: How do educators identifying as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

Theme 1: Community Representation

One participant observed, "Even if they don't say it, they watch. We're the image," reflecting how visibility in acts of service becomes a critical form of leadership and inspiration. Ladson-Billings (2009) discussed advocacy for culturally relevant pedagogy, in which representation is vital in transforming societal narratives and underscores participant responses. Participants challenged dominant stereotypes and demonstrated positive, community-centered images of African American masculinity through their presence and engagement. AAMT focuses on representation as a central pillar of identity construction and resistance against marginalization (Bush & Bush, 2013). Moreover, Butin (2005) suggested that service-learning offers a unique platform where cultural roles and educational leadership intersect, reinforcing identity through action and visibility.

Theme 2: Mentorship Legacy

Service learning experiences had a strong impact on how the educators described their identity formation, particularly through the theme of mentorship, when describing how service learning and identity intersected from their perspectives. Participants articulated a sense of duty to give back, often inspired by mentors who had guided them during their formative years. As one participant shared, “I’m coaching now because

somebody did it for me when I needed it," highlighting a commitment to passing on support and leadership. Butin (2005) characterized such forms of service as pedagogies of connection, where personal history shapes civic engagement. This form of mentorship, deeply embedded in African American educational traditions, aligns with Ladson-Billings's (2009) framework of community-based learning rooted in collective uplift. Bush and Bush (2013) asserted that African American male identity is sustained through intergenerational influence and communal responsibility which clarifies why these educators viewed their involvement not merely as professional obligation but as a continuation of a cultural legacy.

Theme 3: Cultural Affirmation

The final theme that emerged under this subresearch question was cultural affirmation. Participants described how volunteering reconnected them to familial values and heritage; this reconnection affirmed their identity through culturally rooted service. One educator reflected, "Our culture is service, it's how we love, protect, and uplift," illustrating that service-learning was not an external duty but a reflection of cultural identity. This finding resonates with Ladson-Billings (2009), who highlighted that culturally relevant practices validate and celebrate students' and educators' identities through lived experiences. Service learning, as described by Butin (2015), becomes a space where cultural traditions are enacted, not simply preserved. Participants in this study used volunteerism to sustain cultural continuity, which is consistent with Bush and Bush's (2013) theoretical emphasis on the importance of culturally grounded practices in fostering identity development and resistance. Through service, participants affirmed

values deeply rooted in African American community life, illustrating the inseparability of identity and tradition.

Alignment with Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study aligned directly with AAMT, which posited that African American men experience the world through a unique sociocultural lens informed by race, gender, history, and community expectations (Bush & Bush, 2013). The themes of spiritual calling, community representation, mentorship legacy, and cultural affirmation emerged in this study as deeply interconnected with participants' lived experiences as Black male educators. Each narrative underscored how identity, culture, and community are not abstract constructs but active frameworks shaping their service-learning and volunteer experiences. These connections demonstrated how AAMT provides a robust framework for interpreting the motivations and actions of participants who use service as a form of resistance, affirmation, and leadership.

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) EST further complements the interpretations drawn from AAMT by highlighting how individuals operate within interrelated systems—microsystems (family, school), mesosystems (interactions between microsystems), exosystems (institutional environments), macrosystems (cultural values), and chronosystems (historical periods). Participants described service learning as not an isolated activity but influenced by familial traditions, religious values, institutional roles, and cultural legacies. For example, one participant shared, "We're the image," reflecting the macrosystem-level pressure and responsibility placed on African American men to represent community strength and morality. Through this lens, service becomes a means

by which African American male educators navigate and shape the multiple systems that impact their identity and community engagement.

By integrating AAMT and Bronfenbrenner's theory I illustrated how African American male educators function as cultural agents embedded in overlapping systems of influence. Their decisions to mentor, serve, and lead are shaped by personal histories and broader social dynamics, including school systems, church communities, and societal narratives about Black masculinity. When participants say, "Volunteering is my ministry," or "I'm coaching now because somebody did it for me," they illustrate how identity is informed by intergenerational relationships, faith institutions, and educational systems. These actions, consistent with AAMT, reflect how African American men construct identity through cultural memory and resistance while also negotiating systemic constraints in education and society.

Ultimately, these theories intersected to affirm that African American male educators engaged in service learning not merely as a professional duty but as a culturally grounded, socially responsive, and identity-affirming practice. AAMT framed the narrative contextually, anchoring identity in history, resistance, and cultural affirmation (Bush & Bush, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's EST situates these behaviors within the multiple systems influencing individual and collective identity. Together, these frameworks enriched our understanding of how African American male educators interpret and enact their roles in schools and communities, providing a theoretically grounded foundation for analyzing their service-learning experiences.

Limitations

This study explored the experiences of African American male educators engaged in service-learning; here, I discussed limitations. One notable limitation was the small and specific sample size, comprising five self-identified African American male educators working in urban public school settings. The small sample size is appropriate for phenomenological research design aiming for depth rather than breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The homogeneity of the participants may limit generalization. These participants may reflect a subset of individuals who are particularly reflective or passionate about service but not the broader group. Therefore, although rich data were obtained, the findings should be interpreted as reflective of a specific group rather than representative of all African American male educators.

Another limitation involves using virtual interviews as the sole method for data collection. Recruiting self-identified African American male educators working in or with experience working as an educator in urban schools was difficult; to mitigate this challenge, Zoom interviews were offered. While conducting interviews via Zoom allowed me to permit geographic diversity and scheduling flexibility, using this format could have reduced the richness of the data because I may have missed some nonverbal cues and contextual insights. Additionally, some participants may have felt more comfortable in person. Technical issues, environmental distractions, and variations in digital fluency may also have hindered the flow of conversation. Methodological choices must be intentionally aligned with relational depth and contextual understanding goals

when researching service-learning. As such, while the virtual format enabled valuable access, it may have simultaneously limited the richness of the dialogue.

Recommendations

One of the most prominent recommendations for future research is the expansion of the participant sample size and diversity. This study focused on five self-identified African American male educators in urban public school settings, which provided rich, in-depth data but limited the generalizability of the findings. Future studies might employ broader sampling strategies, such as surveys or mixed-methods approaches, to reach more participants across different geographic, socio-economic, and educational contexts. Doing so would allow researchers to examine whether the themes identified in this study—such as spiritual calling, mentorship legacy, and identity reclamation—resonate across a wider population. Creswell and Poth (2018) affirm that diverse and expansive samples can provide additional validity and insight into underexplored social phenomena.

A second recommendation for future research is to further explore how service-learning and volunteerism evolve across different stages of life and career among African American male educators. This study used in-depth interviews that revealed insights into participants' engagement with service from childhood through adulthood, highlighting the ways early experiences with community service shaped their professional identities. Future research might adopt life history or longitudinal qualitative approaches to more systematically examine these developmental trajectories. As Seidman (2019) suggested, interviewing participants at multiple stages can illuminate how personal, cultural, and institutional factors interact over time to influence educators' values and behaviors. Such

research would deepen understanding of how service-learning functions not only as a professional tool but as a lifelong cultural and identity-affirming practice.

Finally, integrating Afrocentric and culturally affirming pedagogies into service-learning frameworks to assess their impact on educational outcomes would be beneficial. The participant responses in this study narrated the strong connection between culture, identity, and community engagement. This suggests that colleges and universities might benefit from designing service-learning curricula that explicitly center on culture, identity, and community. Future research could also evaluate how the intentional incorporation of African American Male Theory in course design affects student engagement, teacher preparation, and overall community involvement (Bush & Bush, 2013). Exploring the research with these recommendations would extend the applicability AAMT and support the development of educational practices that center on the African American male student.

Implications for Social Change

This study presents compelling implications for advancing equity and representation through educational practice and policy. Centering the lived experiences of African American male educators engaged in service-learning, the research highlighted how service-based initiatives function as transformative tools for identity affirmation and community empowerment. Participants in this study articulated that service-learning promotes cultural pride, spiritual connection, and leadership development, affirming that acts of service are embedded within African American cultural traditions and contribute to positive social identity formation. Bush and Bush (2013) emphasized that culturally

responsive frameworks, such as African American Male Theory (AAMT), are vital to understanding how African American men negotiate systemic barriers and cultivate leadership through communal responsibility.

Integrating service-learning into K–12 educational and teacher preparation programs could lead to systemic changes in how African American male educators are supported and how students from diverse backgrounds perceive leadership. Findings suggest that service-learning provides a meaningful way to elevate underrepresented voices and embed cultural and spiritual values into professional practice. This creates opportunities for students to witness educators who reflect their identities engaging in visible, community-based leadership. As Ladson-Billings (2009) argued, culturally relevant pedagogy empowers students and dismantles deficit narratives. This study suggested that such pedagogy extends beyond the classroom into broader community engagement. Institutionalizing service-learning as a standard practice for professional development could thus help normalize equity-driven models of education.

Empowering African American male educators through service-learning can contribute to broader societal shifts in how these educators are viewed and supported. Participants in this study leveraged their visibility in service roles to confront and reorganize prevailing stereotypes, projecting images of strength, care, and cultural continuity. This aligns with Ladson-Billings's (2009) argument that culturally relevant practices embedded in education, including service-learning, can challenge and transform deficit narratives that have long shaped societal perceptions. Reinforcing this framework, Bush and Bush (2013) contended that African American men who engage in community

leadership and culturally grounded work enact meaningful resistance and redefine collective identity. Thus, school systems and policymakers can help facilitate enduring social change cemented in cultural affirmation and visible leadership by intentionally supporting service-learning participation among African American male educators.

Conclusion

Volunteering is a dynamic experience that can bring people belonging to all different cultural and racial groups together within communities around the world to work towards alleviating or solving problems that exist in our society. Volunteering is work that is unpaid, but that comes with benefits such as better health and stronger social networks (Gronlund & Falk, 2019). People volunteer in many ways that are often dictated by cultural norms within certain groups. While we know that African Americans volunteer, we know that they are underrepresented in the space of organized, service-learning programs on college campuses (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Service-learning gives college students the opportunity to put the theory that they learned in the classroom to use through practice in the community (Hart, 2015). Unfortunately, African American male college students do not take advantage of the service-learning opportunity at the same rate as their peers, which causes them to forfeit the positive benefits of service-learning volunteering and to grow as leaders in their communities (Anzaldua, 1987; Weah et al., 2000).

Exploring the Service Learning Experiences of African American Males in Urban Schools is a qualitative, phenomenological study. This study explored the lived service-learning experiences of African American male educators in urban schools. Guided by

African American Male Theory (AAMT), the study sought to understand how these educators perceive and narrate their service experiences, particularly in ways that connect with identity, culture, and community. Three in-depth interviews with five participants provided a subtle understanding of how volunteerism is a civic activity and personal practice enmeshed in one's culture that contributes to identity formation and community engagement.

The central research questions focused on how these educators described their experiences with volunteerism and service-learning and how those experiences influenced their self-perception as African American men. Findings revealed a consistent narrative: for these participants, volunteering was not separate from their professional roles or personal values. The themes that emerged during this study collectively demonstrated that service-learning facilitates professional and personal transformation, enabling participants to resist succumbing to dominant societal narratives. and reinforce a more empowered and culturally grounded sense of self.

AAMT provided a critical framework for interpreting these findings. The theory's emphasis on resisting deficit perspectives, embracing cultural legacy, and asserting African American male agency resonated with participant narratives across every theme. Considering the layered systems in urban education, the study’s results reveal that service-learning is a strong and central pillar to their identities, their practices, and their philosophies. According to the participant narratives, generations of cultural and spiritual influence weigh heavily in the experiences of these educators.

Engaging more African American male college students in service learning and increasing the number of African American male educators in urban schools has the potential to increase representation for African American male students, resulting in increased opportunities for engagement with educators who share their cultural and racial experiences. For institutions of higher education, teacher preparation programs, and educational policymakers, the results underscore the need to embed culturally affirming service-learning opportunities into curricula. This will better prepare future educators and affirm the voices, experiences, and leadership of African American males in education. Inclusion and socially responsive practices should honor and respect the contributions of African American Male educators. Their service is a personal act and a powerful cultural, communal, and educational statement of purpose.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Housekeeping - Did you receive the reminder email? Please email me your consent by going to the reminder email you received and responding to that email with the words, "I Consent." (If consent is not received before interview one)

I want to remind you that this interview will be audio-recorded only, and you may stop me at any time if you do not feel comfortable continuing or want to pause or take a break. Do you understand all of that, or do you have any questions before I proceed?

Before we begin, I want to let you know how this session will go. We will have a brief introduction session where we learn more about one another before we begin. After that, we will move on to the interview questions. The whole process will take 60 - 90 minutes. At times, I may type or write to take notes. Do you have any questions? Let's begin.

Brief Intro Session: (max: 20 mins)

- Background
    - From Baltimore, relocated to Charlotte in 2005
    - Married, 2 children
    - Work - Nonprofit director, been in nonprofits since 2008
- Education
    - BA in Urban Ministry/Counseling
    - Masters in Human & Social Services Nonprofit Administration
    - Doctoral Candidate - Human & Social Services Nonprofit Administration
- The Problem & the Purpose:

- Problem: The underrepresentation of African American male college students in service-learning volunteering programs is a significant problem, leading to missed opportunities for self-identification with a rich tradition of service, limited development of advanced leadership skills, and reduced engagement in meaningful civic interactions for this underrepresented group of college students (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).
- Purpose: To explore the lived volunteer experience of K-12 educators in urban schools who self-identify as African American males.
- Tell me a little about yourself:

  Okay, now we will begin.

RQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with volunteerism?

1. Can you describe your first experience with volunteerism? How did you get involved, and what motivated you to participate?

2. What kinds of volunteer activities have you participated in throughout your career, and how have these experiences impacted you both personally and professionally?

3. How do you think your identity as an African American male has influenced your experiences with volunteerism?

4. What challenges or obstacles have you faced as a volunteer in educational or community settings? How have you navigated these challenges?

5. How do you feel your experiences with volunteerism have shaped your views on leadership and service within the African American community?

6. In what ways, if any, has volunteerism allowed you to connect with or give back to the communities you serve?

SQ1: How do educators who self-identify as African American males narrate and describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteerism?

1. How did you first become involved in service-learning as part of your educational journey? What was the nature of the project or experience?

2. Can you walk me through a specific service-learning experience you had during your college education? What did you learn from that experience?

3. In what ways do you think your participation in service-learning has influenced your development as an educator?

4. How has your identity as an African American male shaped your service-learning experiences? Did it affect how you approached or were perceived in these projects?

5. What impact do you think service-learning has had on the communities or individuals you worked with during your volunteer projects? ***

6. How has participating in service-learning affected your perspective on volunteering and education, particularly as it relates to African American students?

RQ 2: How do educators who self-identify as African American males describe their lived experience with volunteering concerning their identity?

1. How do you feel your identity as an African American male intersects with your experiences as a volunteer? Can you share an example?

2. In your opinion, how does being an African American male affect the way you approach volunteer work, both in educational and non-educational settings?

3. Do you think your race and gender have influenced the expectations placed on you as a volunteer? If so, how?

4. How do you perceive the impact of your identity on the relationships you form with students, colleagues, and community members during volunteer projects?

5. How do you think your volunteer experiences have helped shape or reinforce your identity as an African American male educator?

SQ2: How do educators identifying as African American males describe their lived experience with service-learning volunteering concerning their identity?

1. How did your racial and cultural identity influence your involvement in service-learning volunteering?

2. Can you describe a situation in service-learning where your identity as an African American male shaped the way you interacted with the community you were serving?

3. How did your experiences in service learning reflect or challenge the values, beliefs, or cultural expectations you hold as an African American male?

4. Did you feel that your identity as an African American male educator helped or hindered your ability to connect with the people or communities you served in service-learning? Why or why not?

5. How has your identity shaped the way you now view and approach volunteerism or service-learning in your role as an educator?