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Perceptions of Academic Success Among African American Male High School Graduates in Urban Areas

Anthony Bourne
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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Perceptions of Academic Success Among African American Male High School

Graduates in Urban Areas

by

Anthony Bourne

MA, Webster University, 2016

BA, Columbia College, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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November 2025

Abstract

African American males encounter more severe penalties, academic underperformance, and lower graduation rates compared to their Caucasian male counterparts. Numerous studies have delved into and elucidated the schooling experiences of African American male students from various perspectives, encompassing cultural, structural, racial, community, family, and school viewpoints. However, there remains a scarcity of voices documenting the experiences of African American males who have successfully completed high school in urban settings. The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who graduated from high schools located in urban settings. The Critical Race Theory and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework constituted the conceptual framework for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten African American males who graduated from an urban high school within the last 10 years, and a thematic analysis has been utilized to explore the collected data.

This study found that these 10 African American males, along with their respective family and community members, all placed great value on education. These 10 students desired a classroom environment designed to nurture their academic talents and abilities, for they understand the successful completion of high school is only the first step towards a productive life.

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Dedication

There are a multitude of people who I want to thank for their role in motivating me to achieve this milestone in my life. “And here it begins”: I want to thank my wife, Denise Bourne for being an ever-present constant motivator and source of support throughout this entire journey, my mother: Marilyn Bristow, for being the very first person who believed in me. I want to thank Aunt Betty Lee Marshall and Uncle James Parker, two people who gave me books to read to enhance my mind as opposed to playing with toys at an early age, my great-grandmother, Mary Baker, my grandparents, Avis Wigglesworth, Gillian & Virginia Wigglesworth, Margaret Betancourt and Elizabeth Bristow, a host of Aunts & Uncles, Aunt Dorothy, Uncle/Aunt Raymond & Sarah Pinder, Uncle/Aunt George & Dorothy Smalls, Aunt Daisy Hibbert, Aunt Leola Bristow, Aunt Barbara Jean Bristow, Aunt Herline Humbert, Aunt Frankie Humbert, Mary Davis, my godparents Richard & Betty Wynn, Charles & Bessie Fulmore; my Father & Mother-in-law, my brothers, William, Mark and Terrance, my brothers-in-law, Charles, Donald, and Khalim, my sisters-in-laws Adrian and Pamela, the various Spiritual leaders who “poured” into my life, Nathaniel and Patricia Weathers, Mannie and Beverly Wooten, as well as Dr. Roger Clark.

I dedicate this study to DaShawn, Lateefa, LaShunda, Timothy, Jhayda, Brianna, McKaylah, Alyssa, DaShawn Junior, LaShunda, Emmanuel, Zion, Chassidy, and Timothy Junior.

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I thank God for the opportunity to add this to my life's accomplishments. I have made a multitude of mistakes throughout the course of my life. I have given up on myself at certain times in my life as well, simply because I did not know how to move past my mistakes. I was stuck in a rut, but I also knew that I was worth something and that I just needed to be saved. That is exactly what God did for me, he saved my life, my family, and my marriage. So, I acknowledge Him, first and foremost, for making this possible. As the saying goes, "Won't He do it?!", and the answer is, "Yes, He will!".

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"A man who stands for nothing will fall for anything", so I stand for God because He holds me in his hand. Day in and day out. Amen.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The focus of this research delved into the examination of the actions, behaviors, or motivational sources that significantly impact the high school graduation of African American males. Dropout rates for Black males have been reported at various percentages, ranging from 50% (Johnson, 2014) and 60% (Rogers & Brooms, 2019) to 69.4% - each figure significantly lower than the 81.3% graduation rate for White students (Small-Jordan, 2020). While statistical accuracy may be subject to contention, it undeniably underscores the challenges faced by African American males in achieving this academic milestone. African American students often face disengagement from their educational systems due to factors such as work obligations, parenthood, or a belief that graduation is unattainable due to their low grades and insufficient credit accumulation (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). African American males face disproportionate challenges in various aspects of life if they do not achieve this educational milestone (Jeffers, 2017; Levin et al., 2007).

The failure to graduate is equated to a suboptimal educational outcome, potentially resulting in heightened incarceration rates, lowered socioeconomic statuses leading to an increased reliance on government subsidy programs (e.g., health, nutrition, and socio-developmental programs), and a rise in homelessness (McCarthy & Morote, 2009). Notably, nearly half of African American male students fail to complete high school. The African American male who lacks a high school diploma quite often suffers from an increased likelihood of incarceration, this is the fate they encounter rather than

the opportunity to experience gainful employment (Jeffers, 2017). African American males are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to their White counterparts (Jeffers, 2017). Vega et al. (2015) underscored the interconnectedness of education and the economy, emphasizing that the failure for African American males, along with males from other minority groups, to graduate from high school jeopardizes their enrollment and graduation from college, turning such aspirations into distant dreams. Furthermore, a high school graduate is less likely to engage in criminal activities in comparison to a high school dropout (Gerlinger & Hipp, 2023; Levin et al., 2007). The economic repercussions extend to expectations of diminished earnings and deteriorating health for African American males who discontinue their education in high school.

Previous research has delved into the diverse perspectives that shaped the educational experiences of African American male students. These studies have discussed their lack of cultural identity, weak structural and racial compositions, less than desired community and family involvement, and failed school dimensions (Howard, 2013; 2019). Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of narratives from African American males who have successfully completed high school in urban settings (Howard, 2013; Land et al., 2014). While research on the educational experiences of boys of color has been undertaken (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2011), the scarcity of data specifically documenting the schooling experiences of African American male students necessitates attention (Land et al., 2014; Rowley et al., 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who graduated from high schools located in urban settings. I endeavored to identify the factors that assisted African

American male students who successfully graduated from high school while acknowledging these influences as contributions to their academic success and cultural identity. The results of this study are expected to provide insights that may lead to more inclusive and supportive educational practices for African American males. These findings are anticipated to contribute to the promotion of African American male success rather than reinforcing the prevailing narrative of failure.

In this chapter, I present the research question, and the theoretical framework employed to illuminate the research problem under investigation. I include a compilation of relevant definitions, the literature background, the problem statement, an exploration of the limitations inherent in this study, and a discussion of diverse perspectives surrounding the nature of the phenomenon. Additionally, assumptions related to the issue itself are addressed and scrutinized.

Background

The lack of a successful high school graduation rate for African American males poses a significant threat to the United States, amplifying various societal challenges. This failure not only adversely affects the individuals involved but also has far-reaching consequences that reverberate across the nation. Key areas impacted include heightened incarceration rates, escalated healthcare and social service costs, and an upsurge in overall poverty levels (Bell, 2014). Failing to graduate from high school correlates strongly with an increased likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system, resulting in elevated, and undesired, incarceration rates. Consequently, this perpetuates a cycle of disadvantages and hinders the potential for personal and communal advancement

(Bacher-Hicks, 2021; Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Hemez et al., 2020). Studies have shown that African American males, who are incarcerated, are more likely to have dropped out of high school (e.g., Bacher-Hicks, 2021; Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Hemez et al., 2020); and it is estimated that almost 30 % of these African American males will experience incarceration in their lifetimes (Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Robey et al., 2023).

African American male students have been found to underperform on standardization achievement examinations, they are over-represented in special education classrooms, they experience higher incidents of in-school suspensions or out-of-school expulsions and are more likely to drop-out of high school than their White male counterparts (Land et al., 2014; Lynn et al., 2010). Studies have shown that African American males are in a position where they must develop their social skills for these skills have been found to be instrumental in their ability to learn in a classroom environment (Land et al., 2014). Academic socialization skills are necessary for these students to stay on task during their classroom sessions (Bell, 2014). School-aged African American males continue to underachieve on most academic assessments across the United States K-12 public school systems (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Despite various interventions that have attempted to transform the propensity of academic failure to become academic success, the inability to do so has resulted in the disenfranchisement of the African American male, in the K-12 school system. African American males are the subgroup of students who are most likely to be retained during their K-8 education (Aud et al., 2010), and are three times more likely than Latino and Asian males to be suspended from elementary and secondary schools (Aud et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2023:

Losen et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2012; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). In fact, it has been documented that African American students have the highest rate of suspension in every state (Losen et al., 2015). Similar trends were reported in the rates that African American males were recommended for emotional disturbance or disability services (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Conversely, their academic failure in schools frequently resulted in inferior quality of life options.

Several outside school factors have been analyzed to understand the academic underachievement or underperformance of African American male students including historical, community, and home factors. These factors represent a broad range of challenges that the African American male encounters even before they enter the school system (Cokley, 2016; Morgan & Truman, 2020). For example, these challenges include higher infant mortality rates than those of Caucasian males (Murphy et al., 2012), they also have an increased likelihood of being born into poverty, they have reduced access to adequate health care and other medical resources (Isaacs, 2011), and they often live in neighborhoods where the crime rate is significantly higher than neighborhoods where Caucasian males reside (Morgan & Truman, 2020). School related factors focused on how the school system at large holds diminished values and expectations towards African American students; and, at a local-level classroom, teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards students were analyzed (Howard & Reynolds, 2013). The challenges faced by African American students in completing high school are intricate and multifaceted. This study delves into the perspectives of African American males, aiming to uncover the factors contributing to their successful high school completion. The foundation of this

research lies in its quest to comprehend the myriad experiences that have empowered these students to navigate and triumph in their high school journey. Through an in-depth examination, I sought to shed light on the diverse pathways that lead to successful educational outcomes for African American males, thereby contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on educational equity and achievement.

Problem Statement

Critical race theory (CRT) scholars proposed that the school system is permeated by the same racism that is manifested in society (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The practices, norms, ideologies, and values that have become symptomatic of the more explicit and formal manifestations of racialized power bleeds into the public school system (Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2019). African American males are more likely to experience some form of racial discrimination while enrolled in their respective public schools. These encounters served to become detrimental junctures in their academic development (Hotchkins, 2016). Racial discrimination, along with bias, directly or indirectly contributed to the high rate of suspensions and expulsions among African American male students. Consequently, this reinforced the stereotypical view of African American males as highly disobedient, aggressive, socioemotionally incompetent, and, most importantly, as disruptors within both the social and academic dimensions of the classroom environment (Rowley et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002). At the classroom level, several studies have documented that teachers' perceptions of African American male students tend to have a negative effect on them (Reynolds, 2010; Rios, 2011). Teachers may tend to show differential treatment towards these students (Collier

& Bush, 2012), they hold lowered expectations of their school performance (Lynn et al., 2010), or attribute cultural and structural explanations of their perception for poor, or meager, academic performances from African American students (Allen, 2015). A refusal to embrace a culturally responsive pedagogy also served to create an atmosphere within a classroom that lacks the cultural wealth, knowledge, and skillsets diversity brings (Howard & Terry, 2011).

African American males face harsher disciplinary penalties in schools, underperform academically, and graduate at lower rates than their Caucasian male counterparts (Cohen et al., 2023; Reeves & Kalkat, 2023; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2012; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Several studies have explored and explained the African American male students' schooling experiences. These experiences involve a broad range of viewpoints including cultural, structural, racial, community, family, and school perspectives. Still, the voices of African American males who have successfully completed high school in urban settings are scant. Research on schooling experiences of males of color (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2011) has been conducted; however, given the paucity of data documenting African American male students' schooling, attention should be given to exploring their experiences (Howard, 2013). More qualitative research, designed to gather the voices of African American male students, has been recommended (Rowley et al., 2014). By focusing on the experiences of African American male high school graduates in urban settings, this research aims to illuminate the factors that contributed to their academic success and cultural identity. Through qualitative exploration, I sought to gather the

voices and perspectives of these individuals, shedding light on their unique pathways to graduation. This research adds to existing knowledge by offering insights into the success stories of African American males, thereby challenging deficit-based narratives and providing a more holistic understanding of their educational journeys (Howard, 2013; 2019). A deficit-based model has historically dominated the way of documenting the African American male school experience (Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013). This study it is not framed on a deficit-based model, but it continues the attempt to move the focus from African American male failure to African American male success (see Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013; Rowley et al., 2014).

Purpose of the Study

This study's purpose was to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who have graduated from high schools located in urban settings. The focus of this study was to identify the factors that contributed towards the African American male student's ability to graduate from high school. I used a descriptive qualitative research approach (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Percy et al., 2015); and semistructured interviews were used to gather data. Participants of this study were African American males who have successfully graduated from high school in urban settings within the last 5 years. The results of this study are expected to shed light on the specific factors that positively influenced the graduation outcomes of these individuals. This knowledge has the potential to inform educational psychologists, policymakers, and educators about effective strategies and support mechanisms that can be implemented to enhance the educational experiences and success rates of African American male students

in urban high schools. Ultimately, I aimed to contribute towards the development of more inclusive and equitable educational practices, by addressing the unique challenges faced by this demographic group and fostering a more supportive learning environment.

Research Question

The following research question guides this study:

RQ1: How do African American males, who graduated from urban high schools, describe the factors that contributed towards their academic success?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

CRT (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006) in conjunction with the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2010) constituted the conceptual framework for this study. A basic tenet of CRT is that institutional policies, and their respective practices, are beneficial to the Caucasian racial group over all other minority racial groups. Dixson and Rousseau (2006) offered a notion that serves to contradict the belief that African American males lack the motivation to learn. CRT further adds that the detrimental effect of the unequal level of school disciplinary actions that African American males experience gives clarity to the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline (Anyon et al., 2017). This term describes the systematic transition of certain students from the educational system to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Nance, 2016; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009).

Anyon et al. (2017) stated that the introduction of race-neutral policies will often lead to an outcome that is in opposition to its intended goal, as these policies are inherently racist in practice. To counter this effect, culturally relevant learning material

has been infused in the curriculum, to create a sense of value within the student (Anyon et al., 2017). CRT is a valid framework, designed to analyze the African American males' educational context and experience. Yet, a second and newer conceptual framework complements the theoretical lens for this study.

Harper's (2010) antideficit achievement framework perspective focuses on the success, and assets, of students who are historically underrepresented and underserved. This framework includes a series of antideficit questions that researchers can explore to better understand how students of color persist, and successfully, navigate their educational journey. This study was framed with this antideficit perspective; thus, this conceptual framework is a good fit for this study. Harper's antideficit achievement perspective centers on the achievements and strengths of students historically underrepresented and underserved. This framework incorporates a set of antideficit questions, enabling researchers to delve into a more profound understanding of how students of color persist and successfully navigate their educational journey. This study is aligned with the antideficit achievement perspective presented by Harper; hence, this conceptual framework proves to be well-suited for the current research. CRT and the antideficit framework are described in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I adopted a qualitative research design, employing a descriptive qualitative research approach as advocated by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Percy et al. (2015). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research is characterized by its inductive nature, aligning with the pursuit of a nuanced understanding of an event or

phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The qualitative paradigm facilitates an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under investigation, making it particularly suitable for the present study. This research approach is justified, given the limited depth of prior analysis and research concerning the successful schooling experiences among African American males.

The descriptive generic qualitative approach is used to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Caelli et al., 2003; Sandelowski, 2000). It is appropriate for me to use an interpretive and reflective approach to the understanding of this analysis. The descriptive generic qualitative design involves the interpretation of subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences of things in the outer world (Percy et al., 2015). This approach is a good fit for this investigation, which is centered on the schooling experiences of African American male high school graduates.

Definitions

Antideficit achievement: The term deficit suggests a lack or failure to achieve, whereas the term anti-deficit implies a deliberate and conscious effort to overcome such shortcomings (Harper, 2010).

Cultural competence: It pertains to educators who demonstrate a deep respect for diversity. These educators and their respective institutions actively express and exhibit reverence for the traditions, languages, histories, and cultures of students that differ from their own cultural backgrounds (Ezzani, 2014).

Cultural proficiency: It involves recognizing a gap in understanding between culturally diverse populations. Additionally, it signifies a willingness to adopt the necessary skills, attitudes, and belief systems that could facilitate bridging the divide in cross-cultural settings (Woods et al., 2014).

Culturally affirming practices: It refers to a focus on establishing environments within educational settings that validate and support diverse cultural backgrounds. This concept involves implementing practices and policies that acknowledge, respect, and celebrate the cultural identities of students, creating an inclusive atmosphere that promotes positive learning experiences for all. It may encompass curriculum design, classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, and school-wide initiatives that reflect a commitment to diversity, equity, and cultural understanding (Williams et al., 2022).

Culturally responsive pedagogy: It is a student-centered approach to teaching, wherein cultural diversities are not only acknowledged but also appreciated and used to promote academic achievement (Howard & Terry, 2011).

Assumptions

To uphold the integrity of this study on the African American males' perspective on schooling achievement, various strategies and methodological choices were carefully considered. These choices are grounded in philosophical assumptions encompassing ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological dimensions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Ontologically, I recognized the subjective and diverse nature of the African American males' schooling experience. Assumptions include acknowledging different views of reality among participants. This encompassed perspectives on success,

challenges, and the overall educational journey of African American males. In this study, I assumed that these individuals would possess varied perceptions about their educational realities. I assumed that participants would offer nothing less than their own honest responses to questions asked of them. These responses would come from their respective subjective experiences and not a fictional response created to help this study in any form or fashion. My assumption was that the participants would have some commonalities based on the fact they are all African American males who have graduated from an urban high school. However, some of their experiences, or commonalities, should differ due to their own personal reflections and how they expressed them.

Epistemologically, the research approach was centered on genuinely understanding and representing the unique views of African American male participants. I used participant quotes to articulate their perspectives, and I invested ample time to collect and analyze data. The assumption was that selected participants would authentically share their experiences, ensuring that the knowledge generated was rooted in their truthful narratives rather than the researcher's background.

Axiological assumptions recognized the role of values in research, including an awareness of potential biases. I remained mindful of my biases, and I outlined steps to minimize this impact, emphasizing commitment to limit personal bias. The axiological assumption underscored my dedication to generating meaningful knowledge exclusively based on the participants' accounts of their schooling experiences.

Methodologically, I adhered to assumptions involving inductive reasoning, contextual exploration, and an emerging and flexible design (see Creswell & Poth, 2017).

This included the use of interviews with African American males to gain insights into their perspectives on schooling achievement. These methodological assumptions were deemed critical for the meaningfulness of the study, ensuring that the research approach aligned with the unique cultural and experiential context of the participants.

Scope and Delimitations

To be eligible to participate in this study, each participant had to meet certain criteria: (a) an African American male, (b) graduated from high school within the last 10 years, (c) attended an educational institution located in an urban setting, (d) be older than 18 years of age, (e) be fluent in the English language and (f) no older than 28 years of age. I recruited participants from central Florida, in addition to students from other southern states. The transferability of the findings from this study is constrained to some extent by the inherent characteristics of its descriptive qualitative design. The investigation depended on a limited and homogeneous cohort of participants drawn from a specific local geographic area. Consequently, caution should be exercised in extending the results to alternative locations or practices, as there is no assurance of transferability.

My deliberate emphasis on a relatively small sample size, thoughtfully selected for its homogeneity, aligned with the descriptive qualitative approach (see Percy et al., 2015). This deliberate choice aimed to yield contextually rich individual descriptions, which served as foundational insights for more targeted investigations in the future. While the study's primary focus was situated within a narrowly defined and localized context, the detailed and comprehensive nature of the descriptions generated should facilitate some degree of comparison with other contexts and similar populations.

Limitations

I am an African American male who successfully graduated from an urban high school, albeit in the mid-1980s. Therefore, my own experiences were like those of the participants. However, due to the generation gap between myself and those participating in this study, there were significant differences. As stated, beforehand, I carefully reviewed each interview separately; that action served to eliminate my own bias regarding perceived themes and patterns. My data collection strategy was aimed to ensure the credibility and dependability of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the gathered information. While I assumed that individuals would provide candid responses to the interview questions, it was plausible that the respondents could alter their answers in favor of more socially acceptable responses. Therefore, I considered their answers to be accurate and valid information for recorded data. Finally, this study was limited geographically, as all participants interviewed in this investigation were in large, urban areas in Florida and other southern locations in the United States.

Significance

This study has the potential to serve as a blueprint for current and future members of the teaching profession by revealing the factors that contributed to the participants' successful high school graduation. While previous research has highlighted various reasons for the academic challenges faced by African American males (Bell, 2014), this study provided testimonials that countered these narratives. Harper (2010) recognized the disparities in academic achievement between African American and Caucasian students but also acknowledged that some students succeeded despite facing obstacles. This study

has the potential to challenge the misconception that minority students inherently have motivational and cognitive deficits (Mejia et al., 2018). Instead, it emphasized that these are stereotypes rather than accepted truths.

Woods et al. (2014) acknowledged the historical underperformance of African American males academically, which has been reflected in lower graduation rates. They suggested that this might be due to a devaluation of traditional, or European, pedagogy among African American males. Richey (2013) emphasized the opportunity to learn from others' experiences, by offering insights into what influenced the students' ability to graduate. This study represents a step toward developing cultural proficiency or competency for readers (see Ezzani, 2014). Educators often experience cultural dissonance, thereby hindering their understanding of students' educational, cultural, and social beliefs and values (Ezzani, 2014). Conducting assessments based on productive writing rather than just foundational skills (Woods et al., 2014) could bridge the gap between assumptions and the realities of African American male students (Richey, 2013). The overarching goal was to narrow the cultural, academic, and social gap between racially diverse students and their teachers.

The results of this study may inform the development of policies aimed at reducing disparities in educational outcomes for African American males (see Debnam & Bottiani, 2017). Policy recommendations may include implementing culturally responsive practices in schools, ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, and addressing systemic biases and discrimination within the educational system. In addition, findings of this study have the potential to guide the development of curriculum

materials and instructional approaches that are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African American male students (Williams et al., 2022). Curriculum developers and educators can incorporate the perspectives and experiences of successful African American male graduates into the curriculum, thereby validating their cultural identities and providing positive role models for other students. Finally, the research findings can inform teacher training programs and professional development initiatives aimed at equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to support the academic success of African American male students. Training programs can focus on topics such as cultural competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, and understanding the social and emotional needs of African American male students. By building on the insights gained from this study, future research can continue to advance our understanding of the factors that contributed to the academic success of African American male students and inform efforts to promote educational equity and social justice.

Summary

In this chapter, I focused on introducing the details of this qualitative study aimed at understanding the factors that influenced the high school graduation of 10 African American males, especially given their population groups relatively lower success rates and the societal challenges associated with noncompletion. The chapter began by underscoring the dearth of narratives from African American males who have successfully graduated from urban high schools, thereby emphasizing the need for a shift from a deficit-based model to an antideficit achievement perspective. The identified

problem lies in the racial discrimination and biases experienced by African American males within the educational system, contributing to high rates of suspensions, expulsions, and perpetuation of stereotypes.

The primary purpose of the study was to delve into the schooling experiences of 10 African American males who have graduated from high schools in urban settings, with a specific focus on identifying the factors that contributed to their academic success. This exploration was to be facilitated through semi-structured interviews, aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' unique perspectives. The central research question driving the study was formulated to inquire how these African American males described the factors that played a pivotal role in their academic success. The conceptual framework of the study combined the CRT and the anti-deficit achievement framework. CRT aids in analyzing the racialized power dynamics within the education system, while Harper's framework focuses on acknowledging and leveraging the success and assets of historically underserved students. The study's significance is underscored by its potential to challenge stereotypes, present testimonials of success, and contribute valuable insights to the development of more inclusive and equitable educational practices. I aimed to shed light on the diverse pathways that led to successful educational outcomes for 10 African American males, offering insights into the challenges faced and strategies employed by this demographic group.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

African American males face more severe disciplinary actions in schools, lowered expectations of academic performance, and have been found to experience lower graduation rates compared to their Caucasian male counterparts (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Losen et al., 2015; Reeves & Kalkat, 2023). While various studies have explored the schooling experiences of African American male students from cultural, structural, racial, community, family, and school perspectives, there is a scarcity of voices from those who have successfully completed high school in urban settings. Existing research on the schooling experiences of males of color (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2011) has been conducted, yet there remains limited data documenting the experiences of African American male students, which emphasized the need for further exploration (Howard, 2013).

CRT scholars argue that the pervasive racism present in society is mirrored within the school system (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The practices, norms, ideologies, and values indicative of explicit racialized power manifestations extend into the educational sphere (Howard, 2019). African American males often encounter racial discrimination during their schooling, which negatively impacts their academic development (Hotchkins, 2016). This discrimination, coupled with bias, contributes directly or indirectly to the disproportionate rate of suspensions and expulsions among African American male students. Consequently, it serves to reinforce the stereotypical perceptions of them as disruptive, disobedient, aggressive, and socio-

emotionally incompetent in both social and academic aspects of the classroom environment (Rowley et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002).

Recommendations for more qualitative research to capture the successful schooling experiences of African American male students have been made (Rowley et al., 2014). In this study, I deviated from the historically dominant deficit-based model in documenting the African American male school experience, aiming to shift the focus from failure to success (see Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013; Rowley et al., 2014). In this chapter, I present the methodology employed for the literature search to examine existing research. After detailing the approach used to conduct a comprehensive literature review, the conceptual framework is discussed to encompass various concepts relevant to the study. The challenges African American students face within the educational system are described in the literature review section. Finally, I conclude the chapter by underscoring the gaps in the literature at the intersection of these topics, emphasizing the need for this study.

Literature Search Strategy

A widespread literature review was conducted around the topic of African American males' educational experiences. The methodology for searching involved using the Walden University Library to access various databases, such as PsycINFO, PsycArticles, MedLine, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and SociINDEX. In addition, Google Scholar was employed to identify pertinent articles that might not have been uncovered by these databases. The selected articles were predominantly peer-reviewed and primarily focused on the last decade. The search

strategy incorporated keywords and the implementation of the Boolean method to generate various combinations of keyword terms.

There were various keywords I used to obtain relevant information. These are the keywords I employed: *African American males, graduation rates, urban high schools, rural high schools, retention rates, textual lineage, politicized ethics of care, school discipline, accommodation, school resistance, at-risk youth, school-to-prison pipeline, systems model, diversity, deficit thinking, education attainment, CRT, achievement gap, implicit bias, anti-deficit achievement framework* and *microaggressions*. These words were used to find information that contributed to this study.

Conceptual Framework

I used CRT as articulated by Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2018), in conjunction with the anti-deficit achievement framework developed by Harper (2010) as the conceptual framework.

CRT in Education

This is a framework within legal studies and social sciences that emerged in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s. While it originated in legal discipline, it has since expanded its influence into various fields, including education, sociology, and political science (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate introduced CRT to the field of education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) highlighted the enduring significance of race in society at large, emphasizing its particularly influential role in the realm of education. Despite this, the authors contended that race had been insufficiently theorized as a subject of scholarly investigation within the

educational context. In response to this theoretical gap, they advocated for the utilization of CRT to scrutinize the dynamics of race and racism in education. It has been discovered far too often that African American males are victims of racial discrimination in their educational institutions (Hotchkins, 2016). In their proposal, Ladson-Billings and Tate drew upon the insights of Harris (1993, 2020) to explore the intersection of race and property rights. They specifically delved into the concept of whiteness as property and elucidated how this theory could be employed to comprehend inequities present in schools and the educational system. By integrating Harris's legal scholarship into the realm of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate set a course that led us toward the application of CRT in the educational discourse.

After 20 years of CRT in education, Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2018) indicated that CRT within the educational context asserted that the manifestation of racial inequities in education was a direct consequence of an achievement system centered around competition. It scrutinized the impact of educational policies and practices on the formulation of racial inequity and the perpetuation of normative whiteness. Challenging the prevailing narrative that propagated the inherent inferiority of people of color and the normative superiority of white individuals, CRT in education embraced a stance that rejected such biases. In its exploration, CRT in education eschews historicism, delving into the historical linkages between contemporary educational inequities and past patterns of racial oppression. Through intersectional analyses, CRT acknowledges the mediation and interaction of race with other identity markers such as gender, class, sexuality, linguistic background, and citizenship status. Beyond merely documenting disparities,

CRT in education actively advocates for meaningful outcomes that address and rectify racial inequities. These foundational concepts not only serve as a framework for assessing past educational endeavors but also offer a guide for identifying areas that require further attention and action.

A foundational principle of CRT asserts that institutional policies and associated practices disproportionately favor the majority White racial group at the expense of all other minority racial groups (Dixson & Rousseau, 2018). CRT also contends that the adverse impact of the unequal application of school disciplinary actions on African American males might potentially contribute to the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline (Anyon et al., 2017). The implementation of ostensibly race-neutral policies often results in outcomes contrary to their intended goals, as these policies inherently embody racism in practice. To mitigate this impact, the educational curriculum should incorporate culturally relevant learning materials, aiming to instill a sense of value within the student (Anyon et al., 2017).

According to Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2018), one of the most prominent components regarding the use of CRT in education is the concept of counternarratives. The counternarrative perspective emphasizes the acknowledgment of experiential knowledge from people of color and the need to shift perspectives. It involves presenting alternative stories or narratives that challenge and contradict prevailing or dominant narratives (Miller et al., 2020). It is a method of storytelling that seeks to provide a different, often marginalized, and less represented viewpoint. Counternarratives aim to disrupt and subvert the dominant discourse, offering alternative interpretations and

perspectives that may challenge stereotypes, biases, or historical inaccuracies (Delgado, 1989). Counternarratives serve as a vital function by challenging dominant narratives that reinforce racial stereotypes.

Over the last several decades, numerous counternarratives have been incorporated into educational scholarships, exemplifying an expanded effort to provide alternative narratives. For instance, Howard (2008) extensively detailed the counternarratives of ten African American male middle and high school students. Howard contended that the use of counternarratives empowers African American males, allowing them to present narratives that challenge pervasive rhetorical portrayals depicting them as culturally deficient, socially inadequate, uneducated, unmotivated, prone to violence, and anti-intellectual. Similarly, investigations into the experiences of successful African American students in mathematics have yielded multiple counternarratives that directly challenge prevailing majoritarian narratives (Berry et al., 2014; Jett, 2012). The stories of successful African American learners in mathematics sends a powerful message challenging dominant narratives that depict educational failure among African American students, portraying them as incapable or unwilling to learn (Berry et al., 2014). This concept of counternarrative is an excellent fit for Harper's (2010) ideas on the antideficit achievement framework.

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

In the 1960s, Bernstein formulated a theoretical framework positing that academic underachievement could be attributed to individual students, particularly focusing on their linguistic competence. Bernstein (1961) asserted that the failure to acquire a formal

language, distinct from the commonplace language used by working-class families as outlined by Mason (1986), contributed to their academic struggles. Over time, Bernstein contended that lower-class students faced a more pronounced challenge in employing or acquiring a sophisticated form of language compared to their middle-class counterparts (Michael, 2015). This theoretical perspective inferred that social class structure played a pivotal role in determining a student's capacity to comprehend and utilize language, thereby impacting their learning experiences within an educational setting.

Furthermore, the implication of this belief system was that individuals from the upper-class social stratum possessed cognitive abilities superior to those from the lower class. This assumption was grounded in the perception that the upper-class exhibited a perceived proficiency in language that was unattainable for individuals in lower social strata. Critics characterized Bernstein's (2005) code theory as a deficit hypothesis, denoting a perspective that viewed academic success as contingent upon one's social standing. While subjected to criticism, Bernstein's code theory also functioned as an explanatory framework for understanding academic outcomes in relation to different social classes within society.

As the trajectory of Bernstein's theory advanced, it evolved into a concept commonly referred to as deficit thinking (Davis & Museus, 2019). The origins of deficit thinking trace back to the early 1600s, marked by the development of a negative belief system regarding minority communities. This system propagated the notion that members of minority societies, particularly African and Native Americans, were inherently limited in their intellectual capacities, they suffered from linguistic deficiencies, they lacked the

motivation to learn, and they were inherently prone to immoral behavior (Valencia, 1997). These detrimental viewpoints and stereotypes persist prominently in contemporary political, educational, occupational, and entertainment spheres. The enduring prevalence of such negative perceptions sheds light on why deficit thinking is often invoked to explain the perceived underwhelming academic performances among minority populations in present-day educational settings. Described as a mechanism perpetuated by macro and micro-level educational policies and practices, deficit thinking is implicated in maintaining lower socioeconomic students of color within specific classrooms (Valencia, 1997).

Contrary to the ideal of deficit thinking, Harper (2010, 2012) introduced the antideficit achievement framework, presenting a novel approach to confront academic challenges experienced by African American males. In his work, Harper recognized prevailing explanations for academic setbacks, concurrently acknowledging instances of academic success achieved by individuals amidst significant obstacles. Harper advocated for a paradigm shift, suggesting an alternative perspective that views the proverbial glass as half-filled rather than half-empty. Central to his proposal was the inversion of questions surrounding disadvantages, inadequacies, and failures, redirecting the focus towards understanding the factors contributing to success (Harper, 2012). Harper's (2010) antideficit achievement perspective is centered on acknowledging and emphasizing the success and abilities of students who have been historically underrepresented and underserved. Within this framework, a series of anti-deficit questions are integrated,

offering researchers an avenue to explore the mechanisms through which students of color persist and effectively navigate their educational trajectories.

In conducting research interviews, Harper (2010) recommended changing the focus from a deficit-based approach to a strength-based approach. While the questions outlined in the framework are adaptable and interchangeable, their design emphasized a departure from conventional approaches. These questions are intended to serve as alternatives, diverging from the conventional reliance on existing theories and conceptual models that routinely scrutinize deficits. For example, a deficit-oriented question is “Why do so few Black male students enroll in college?” Instead, an antideficit reframing proposes “how were college aspirations cultivated among Black male undergraduates who are currently enrolled?” (Harper, 2010). Researchers employing this framework are encouraged to purposefully investigate how certain students of color have achieved academic success. The antideficit achievement framework draws inspiration from theories in psychology, sociology, and education. Researchers are prompted to explore these theories in an alternative manner, departing from the conventional approach and opting for an ‘instead-of’ fashion.

Relevance of CRT and Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to this Study

I used CRT and the antideficit achievement perspective as the overarching conceptual framework for my study, aligning with the ethos of highlighting strengths, abilities, talents and successes. Both frameworks stand as a valid framework for examining the educational context and experiences of African American males. In the context of African American high school students' success, CRT provides a

comprehensive lens to understand the dynamics of racial inequities, challenge biases, and explore counternarratives that empower marginalized voices. One foundational principle of CRT asserts that institutional policies favor the majority White racial group, leading to racial inequities in education (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018). CRT further explores the impact of race on school disciplinary actions, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Anyon et al., 2017). Counternarratives, a prominent component of CRT, challenge dominant narratives and emphasize the importance of experiential knowledge from people of color (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018).

The antideficit achievement framework complements CRT by offering a strength-based approach to studying academic success. Rooted in a departure from deficit thinking, Harper's (2010, 2012) framework emphasizes recognizing and emphasizing the success and assets of historically underserved students, particularly Black. This framework encourages researchers to invert questions from deficit-oriented to strength-based, shifting the focus towards understanding the factors contributing to success. Harper's antideficit achievement framework aligns with CRT principles by challenging the prevalent deficit-oriented perspectives. It serves as a guide in this study to investigate how students of color, specifically Black males, have achieved academic success. By advocating for a strength-based approach and prompting alternative perspectives, this framework provides a deep understanding of the mechanisms through which high school Black students navigate their educational journeys.

The use of CRT and the antideficit achievement framework in studying high school Black students' experiences of success offered a comprehensive and alternative

perspective. CRT provided a theoretical foundation to understand racial inequities, challenge biases, and explore counternarratives, while the antideficit framework complements by offering a strength-based approach, emphasizing success and assets. Together, these frameworks offered a strong analytical theoretical tool for examining the complex dynamics of success among high school Black students.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

I centered the literature review on the challenges faced by African American students on their path to graduation, explores the various ways in which the educational system contributes to the high school dropout rates of African American males and examines the role of families.

African American Males High School Graduation

African American males encounter significant obstacles in attaining the milestone of high school graduation. Factors such as work commitments, parenthood, and a perception of graduation as unachievable due to low grades and insufficient credit accumulation contribute to their disengagement from the educational system (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). Failing to achieve this academic milestone is associated with adverse outcomes, including heightened incarceration rates, lower socioeconomic statuses leading to increased dependence on government subsidy programs (e.g., health, nutrition, and socio-developmental programs), and a rise in homelessness (McCarthy & Morote, 2009).

During the 2012-2013 school year, Black male students exhibited lower 4-year high school graduation rates in 35 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia (Schott Foundation For Public Education, 2015). Purdy (2021) asserted in her research article

that African American males were twice as likely as their White counterparts to discontinue their education before the cohort graduation date. Dropout rates for Black males have been reported at various percentages, ranging from 50% (Johnson, 2014) and 60% (Rogers & Brooms, 2019) to 69.4%—each figure significantly lower than the 81.3% graduation rate for White students (Small-Jordan, 2020). In the state of Michigan, for example, only 61% of Black boys graduate high school on time, compared to 75% of Black girls, 81% of White boys, and 87% of White girls (Reeves & Kalkat, 2023). Additionally, African American males exhibit a higher likelihood of dropping out compared to African American females, with studies indicating their increased propensity to leave school at an earlier age than their female counterparts (Davis, 2015).

African American male students who fail to complete high school face a higher likelihood of incarceration than of securing gainful employment (Jeffers, 2017). African American males are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to their White counterparts (Jeffers, 2017). The interconnectedness of education and the economy is emphasized by Vega et al. (2015), who argue that the failure of African American males, along with males from other minority groups, to graduate from high school jeopardizes both enrollment and graduation from college, transforming such aspirations into distant dreams. Additionally, high school graduates are less likely to engage in criminal activities compared to high school dropouts (Gerlinger & Hipp, 2023; Levin et al., 2007). The economic consequences extend to expectations of reduced earnings and declining health for African American males who discontinue their education in high school. The economic consequences impact not only this generation of students but also the

generation that comes after them. There is an increased likelihood that their children will reside in crime-ridden areas (Morgan & Truman, 2020), experience higher mortality rates (Murphy et al., 2012), and have less access to community resources due to their lower socio-economic status (Isaacs, 2011).

Educational System

Several academic factors have been associated with high school dropout among African American males. School-related factors focused on how the school system at large holds values and expectations towards African American students; and, at a local-level classroom, teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards students were analyzed (Howard & Reynolds, 2013). African American males have been found to underperform on standardized achievement examinations. They are over-represented in special education classrooms, experience higher incidents of in-school suspensions or out-of-school expulsions and are more likely to drop out of high school than their White male counterparts (Land et al., 2014; Lynn et al., 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010). African American males are the subgroup of students most likely to be retained during their K-8 education (Aud et al., 2010) and are three times more likely than Latino and Asian males to be suspended from elementary and secondary schools (Aud et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Studies have shown that children who experience one school suspension, in the ninth grade, are twice as likely to drop out of high school in comparison to a child who never experienced a school suspension (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Teachers' Perception of their Students

It has been posited that heightened expectations of success serve as a benchmark influencing students' academic aspirations (Kincaid & Yin, 2011). Research on teacher perception and expectation suggests that students with lower expectations from their teachers tend to obtain poorer academic outcomes, encounter increased classroom conflicts, and have fewer instructional opportunities compared to students whose teachers set higher expectations for them (Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020). When educators diminish the academic expectations for African American males in the classroom, the outcomes tend to fall even below these less-than-ideal projections (Rogers & Brooms, 2019). The reduced academic expectations, often referred to as teacher bias, are observed more frequently among educators from distinct ethnic or cultural backgrounds. This phenomenon poses a significant impediment to the academic progress of African American male students (Gershenson et al., 2015). Interestingly, instances of student bias are less prevalent when students are taught by educators of the same race or gender, in contrast to professionals from the opposite racial demographic (Gershenson et al., 2015).

Biased stereotypes have been identified as a potential factor contributing to differential teacher responses when addressing undesirable behaviors exhibited by Black students. For instance, a study conducted by Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) examined teachers' reactions to repeated violations of classroom expectations, taking into account the students' racial background. The findings revealed that biased stereotypes did not appear to influence teachers' perceptions of the student following the initial infraction. However, when teachers were presented with a scenario involving repeated instances of

misbehavior by the same student, there was an increased likelihood of interpreting such behavior as a significant indicator of problematic patterns, particularly when the student was Black as opposed to White. Okonofua and Eberhardt's study revealed how racial biases can contribute to variations in teacher responses to undesirable behaviors among Black and White students.

Disciplinary Disproportionality

Black students face a heightened risk of experiencing disproportionate disciplinary consequences (Cohen et al., 2023). They are more than three times as likely as their White counterparts to face exclusion from instruction due to disciplinary actions (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2012). Despite constituting approximately 16% of U.S. public school students, Black students account for over 30% of in-school suspensions, nearly 40% of out-of-school suspensions, and 30% of expulsions (ACT-UNCF, 2015; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). African American students are 2.2 times more likely to receive a referral to law enforcement or face a school-related arrest than their white counterparts. In high schools with a high proportion of Black and Latino students, 51% have sworn law enforcement officers (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). While school-related arrests can lead to brief stays in juvenile detention centers, it's noteworthy that, despite the inclusion of educational components within law enforcement facilities, the quality of education provided is inferior to that in traditional educational institutions (Mallett, 2016; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016).

The probability of Black students within the Indiana K-12 school system being subjected to school suspension or expulsion is 13-16 percent higher than that of their White counterparts (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). Minority students are more prone to receiving school suspensions for disobedience or disruption rather than incidents involving violence or misconduct (Cheng, 2019; Smolkowski et al., 2016). Prolonged absence from school due to disciplinary reasons can lead to diminished grades, academic failure, and a compromised self-image.

African American males, constituting 8% of all students, account for 19% of those students expelled without the provision of educational services (United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). This experience may contribute to lower reading levels, a common challenge for African American male students (Kafele, 2012). African American males face three times the rate of school suspensions and expulsions compared to any other student population in the country (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020). Impaired literacy adversely affects students' critical thinking abilities, appropriateness of behavior, and their capacity to identify with diverse figures from the past or present (Boone et al., 2010).

One additional consequence of school suspensions is their identification as a primary factor in the increased likelihood of students becoming ensnared in the school-to-prison pipeline. The elevated frequency of out-of-school suspensions/expulsions conditions students to be disengaged from the school environment, diminishing their motivation to achieve academic success (Cheng, 2019).

Implicit Racial Bias

It has been identified as a factor, wherein African American students are more likely to receive disciplinary referrals than White students (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Implicit racial bias involves the use of unconscious biases against a culture due to negative stereotypes. It may also explain why school suspension rates for African Americans increased from 37% to 49% during 1999 to 2007. Concurrently, school suspension rates for White male students decreased from 18.2% to 17.7% during the same period (Cheng, 2019).

While the existence of disciplinary disproportionality is evident, determining its precise causes has proven challenging. Several studies have contradicted the idea that disproportionality is solely a result of actual variations in the rate or types of offenses (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). One probable factor contributing to this disproportionality is the disparate treatment of Black students (Howard, 2013). The widespread discrimination against Black males within the judicial system (Rucker & Richeson, 2021) may parallel similar biases in the classroom, often compared to a courtroom setting (Weiner, 2003). Additionally, these disciplinary patterns may significantly impact urban schools, as Black students make up a substantial proportion of the student body in urban contexts (Welsh & Swain, 2020). Simultaneously, urban schools grapple with other systemic inequities and challenges, potentially intensifying the vulnerability of their students.

Recently, Santiago-Rosario et al. (2021) delved into the racial discipline gap, aiming to comprehend how the future outcome expectations held by elementary school teachers (N = 33; Grades K-6) for their students (N = 496) could predict disparities in

racial discipline. The authors investigated the links between teachers' expectations regarding academic and behavioral outcomes and the incidence of office discipline referrals (ODRs) throughout the year. The results unveiled a disproportionate number of ODRs for Black students compared to their White counterparts. Moreover, students with lower expectations from their teachers received more ODRs than their peers who were rated more favorably, irrespective of race. Notably, as teacher expectations increased by each unit, the ODR disparity between Black, Latinx, and White students diminished. Finally, the multilevel models exploring teacher expectations of student outcomes accounted for approximately 21% of the observed difference in ODRs between Black and White peers. Teachers' expectations and biases are believed to play a role in the systematic differences observed in how teachers attribute expectations to student groups (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Over time, this can detrimentally affect the learning experiences of students who consistently face lower standards that fail to challenge their potential (Yeager et al., 2014).

In the study conducted by Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019), the objective was to investigate the potential contributions of teachers to disciplinary disproportionality. The analysis focused on the perceptions and hypothetical responses of pre-service teachers concerning an ambiguously defiant seventh-grade student. The aim was to ascertain whether the participants perceived the behavior of the ostensibly Black student as more stable and likely to recur, as posited by the attribution-based theory of stereotypes. Notably, pre-service teachers assigned to read a questionnaire featuring the Black student did indeed rate the behavior as more likely to recur. However, intriguingly, these

participants did not exhibit a significant preference for selecting more stable causes when tasked with imagining the specific reason for the student's behavior. These findings align with existing literature suggesting that biases and discrimination may manifest implicitly or unconsciously rather than intentionally within educational contexts.

Kunesh and Noltemeyer's study also underscored that participants' perceptions regarding the likelihood of recurrence, or their attributions regarding stability, were found to be influenced by the student's race. This association between stability and student race persisted whether the hypothetical student's race was implied solely through a stereotypical name or explicitly stated. The study's results suggest that certain teachers may hold the belief that an ambiguously defiant Black male student is more prone to future misbehavior compared to a White male student, even when their past behaviors are identical. This observation aligns with an attributional model of stereotypes, indicating that stereotypes can impact individuals' attributions about the stability of others' behavior. Some teachers may harbor negative stereotypes about Black male students, leading to differential perceptions and responses to their actions.

Santiago-Rosario et al. (2021) and Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) demonstrated how implicit racial bias and stereotypes present in the school system are highly detrimental for Black male students. Nance (2016) suggests implementing debiasing training to assist educators in reducing their reliance on implicit racial biases, which can lead to hasty disciplinary decisions. These preconceived notions about minority behavior contribute to disparities in both in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, often resulting in the abrupt loss of educational opportunities. Each suspension reduces

the probability of a student graduating from high school by 20%, and it diminishes the likelihood of attending a postsecondary institution by 12% (Nance, 2016). This detrimental effect extends beyond the school environment, as evidenced by a higher likelihood of involvement with the juvenile system in the subsequent years for students subjected to exclusionary discipline compared to their counterparts (Nance, 2016). This heightened risk becomes especially worrisome when compounded by disciplinary disproportionality, given the pervasive discrimination faced by Black males at various stages of the judicial process (Rucker & Richeson, 2021).

Lack of Same-Race, Same-Sex Role Models

African American males constitute a mere 1% of educators in the K-12 school system, offering limited prospects for same-race, same-sex students in need of role models (Johnson, 2014). These students often yearn for guidance through tangible examples, seeking mentors who embody various roles such as father figures, disciplinarians, nurturers, or other forms of positive influence (McKinney De Royston et al., 2017). Young Black males aspire for individuals capable of fostering a secure, encouraging, and affectionate environment (McKinney De Royston et al., 2017), while simultaneously providing a sense of structure and discipline infused with love, in contrast to an atmosphere marked by indifference (Kafele, 2012; Stanley, 2012). This shared need for love and acceptance from elder figures emerges as a crucial commonality between African American males and females.

African American females often benefit from a more extensive academic support system compared to their male counterparts, primarily due to a higher representation of

African American female educators than male educators. African American female teaching professionals employ a pedagogical approach that emphasizes intellectual inclusion and expansion in the classroom (Lane, 2018). This approach is grounded in the belief system encouraging females to counteract policies and procedures that perpetuate the dominance of White males in educational settings. The practice of embracing the maternal (McArthur & Lane, 2019), or the concept of being a second mother, involves older female educators presenting themselves as essential maternal figures for female students. This form of other-mothering serves as a motivational force for students, instilling the belief that they can endure and overcome challenges that persistently confront them academically. African American females frequently encounter situations that contribute to heightened confidence in their academic skills and abilities. These experiences not only reinforce their sense of self-worth but also solidify their academic perspectives and performance (Saunders et al., 2002). In this context, Black female students exhibit a more substantial protective factor than their male counterparts within the school system. The apparent deficiency in care, particularly directed towards African American males, stands out as a significant issue that potentially acts as an important factor contributing to their high school dropout rates (McKinney De Royston et al., 2017).

In addition to the absence of same-race, same-sex role models, another challenge faced by Black male students is the lack of literature in the classroom that delves into their culture, ethnicity, or history. Textual lineage is defined as a method that facilitates Black males' exploration of their identity, encompassing lessons about their history,

culture, and worldview. This approach serves as a catalyst for these individuals to engage in academic achievement while shaping their cultural identity (Johnson, 2014).

Consequently, textual lineage is a crucial practice contributing to the formation of cultural identity.

The inclusion of culturally relevant reading materials is imperative for fostering a sense of belonging in the learning environment, alleviating the pressure to assimilate into the culture of others (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020).

Counter to this, the concept of colorblind racism (Kohli et al., 2017) suggests that distorting history or neglecting literature that represents the minority side of history is an active effort to erase the lived oppression of people of color. Textual lineage plays a pivotal role in the development of the emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of students (Boone et al., 2010).

Labeling and Special Education Classes

The use of labels that create false perceptions of students (Kenyatta, 2012) and the tendency to place more African American students in special education classes (Banks, 2017) rather than advanced placement or gifted classes (Schott Foundation For Public Education, 2015) are also contributing factors to African American students' lack of success in graduating from high school. As previously discussed, African American students have the highest rate of suspension in almost every state (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020). Similar trends were reported in the rates African American males were recommended for emotional disturbance or disability services (Banks, 2017).

Educators often employ labels as a convenient means of categorizing students, yet the repercussions on the students themselves are profoundly adverse. Students who undergo early assessments and receive labels often suffer from the negative implications associated with these categories. Such early assessments, compounded by inherent biases, contribute to exclusionary practices within the American educational system. These practices significantly influence the experiences of African American males, creating barriers and impediments that frequently lead to academic failure and eventual withdrawal from the educational system (Kenyatta, 2012).

When educators resort to labeling, they overlook the diverse capacities of students and fail to recognize them as capable individuals. This oversight is underscored by the statistic revealing that African American students constitute over 26% of all children currently enrolled in special education classrooms (Banks, 2017). While acknowledging the presence of mental health issues among high school-aged students, it is crucial to note that numerous African American male students are classified as ‘behavior problems,’ justifying their placement in special education classes. Research indicates that African American students are more likely to face disciplinary consequences for minor infractions compared to their White counterparts (Schott Foundation For Public Education, 2015). Graham et al. (2014) emphasized that the perception of African American boys as aggressive by their teachers increases the likelihood of experiencing more school suspensions and higher dropout rates compared to peers who are not labeled in such a manner.

Acting Cool: A Factor Contributing to Diminished Academic Expectations

One factor indirectly contributing to the diminished academic expectations of African American students is the phenomenon of 'acting cool.' Acting cool involves the nonconformity of students within the classroom, identifying them as troublemakers rather than students in need of academic assistance (Kincaid & Yin, 2011). Additionally, the lack of cultural proficiency among teaching professionals increases the likelihood of higher disciplinary incidents leading to suspensions and expulsions (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020).

In 1992, Richard Majors and Janet Billson authored a book titled *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. The book describes how African American males perceive the "cool pose" as an expression of their manhood, representing their social status and aspirations in life (Unnever & Chouhy, 2020). This expression of identity can also create the perception that the individual is a 'tough guy' who may resort to violence when angered, provoked, or mistreated. Being seen as a tough guy or ultra-masculine may foster the misconception that the individual prioritizes being cool over academic success. Quaylan Allen (2013) characterizes the act of being cool as a form of resistance within the classroom—a method to preserve one's social and cultural identity rather than adopting the identity dictated by White America through school ideology. This underscores the importance of textual lineage, learning about the history of one's own culture rather than conforming to the expectations of another social group. When Black males fail to see the advantages of educational assimilation, they may resort to

developing their masculinity, viewed as a threat within the classroom setting, as they question the actions of white hegemony.

The Role of Families

The absence of a father has proven to have a significant detrimental impact on African American males. Fathers play a crucial role in providing financial stability, serving as a model for acceptable and unacceptable behavior in various situations, and contributing to the social, emotional, and cultural development of young men (Land et al., 2014). When fathers are absent from the home, young Black males miss the opportunity to have a tangible mentor guiding them on the path to manhood. This situation becomes especially pronounced considering that single-parent households have risen to 63% in certain sections of the county, with 92% of these families headed by mothers as the sole parent present (Orrock & Clark, 2018). The lack of this guiding figure forces students to mature faster than they otherwise might, potentially contributing to the adoption of behaviors associated with the cool pose, as addressed in an earlier section.

Having both parents present contributes to the creation of a well-balanced child, enhancing the likelihood of increased self-worth, trust, identity, and academic achievement compared to students from single-parent households. A well-balanced child is better equipped with the necessary support system to navigate the peculiar operational practices present in the K-12 school environment. When the term "strange" is employed, it reflects the reality that African American students must learn to navigate a system designed to favor the White majority. The lack of textual lineage and culturally relevant teaching styles forces students into a position where they must decide on their

educational path. They must choose between abandoning their desire for help in developing their cultural identity or assimilating into the dominant White culture promoted in schools. Resistance to assimilation often places students in situations where they face school expulsions, out-of-school suspensions, placement in special education courses, and exclusion from or denial of entry into gifted or advanced placement classrooms.

Parents play an essential role in helping students navigate through systems, especially at a time when the development of individual race-based epistemologies is emerging. However, by deeming them to be unessential and irrelevant, these systems often contribute to the withdrawal from school for many African American males (Almeida, 2015). CRT Theorists argue that teaching professionals should be conscientious of these realities and become more sensitive to the lives of their students (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Unfortunately, the opposite often occurs, leading to the withdrawal from school for many African American males.

While the composition of the family act as a contributing factor of academic outcome, families and students are often the target of microaggressions within the school system. Kohli et al. (2017) document instances where African American students and their families bear blame for academic failure. They highlight that attributing students' academic challenges solely to parents' failure to read to their children constrains academic growth, neglecting acknowledgment of systemic structures or policies that disadvantage students of color (Kohli et al., 2017).

In a case study described by Cokley (2016), teachers observed a shift in the behavior of a fourth-grade African American male student. The student ceased raising his hand to answer questions, showed minimal interest in storytelling or classroom activities, and was subsequently labeled as "unmotivated," "apathetic," with "learning difficulties" and "a bad attitude" (Cokley, 2016). Cokley terms this occurrence the "4th-grade failure syndrome," attributing it to the shift in classroom teaching style from the social interactive style of the third grade to the competitive individualistic style of the fourth grade. The teacher's refusal or failure to recognize this syndrome results in the student being labeled, marking the beginning of his academic decline.

If there is a disproportionate representation of Black boys in special education programs as opposed to gifted or advanced education programs, it raises significant concerns. Black and Latino students collectively constitute 42% of student enrollment in schools offering gifted and talented education (GATE) programs, but their actual enrollment in these GATE programs is only 28%. This contrasts with the statistics for White students, who comprise 49% of all students in schools offering GATE programs but represent 57% of students enrolled in those programs, as reported by the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights in 2016.

In the broader context, African American males make up 16% of the total student population in the United States., yet they account for 30% of students who experience grade retention from one school year to the next. This statistic is especially striking when compared to the information indicating that fewer than 20% of African American males participate in gifted and talented education programs (Harper, 2012).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter provided a landscape of current challenges African American male students face in graduating from high school. It is evident that African American males encounter more severe penalties, academic underperformance, and lower graduation rates compared to their Caucasian male counterparts. Numerous studies have delved into and elucidated the schooling experiences of African American male students from various perspectives, encompassing cultural, structural, racial, community, family, and school viewpoints. However, there remains a scarcity of voices documenting the experiences of African American males who have successfully completed high school in urban settings.

While research on the schooling experiences of boys of color has been conducted (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2011), the limited data available necessitates a focus on exploring the experiences of African American male students (Howard, 2013). Recommendations for more qualitative research to capture the voices of African American male students have been made (Rowley et al., 2014). Historically, a deficit-based model has dominated the documentation of African American male schooling experiences (Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013). However, it is essential to note that this study does not adhere to a deficit-based model; instead, it endeavors to shift the focus from African American male failure to African American male success (Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013; Rowley et al., 2014). The purpose of this study is to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who graduated from high schools located in urban settings. The next chapter describes the methods used to explore this topic.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who graduated from high schools located in urban settings. The focus was to identify the factors that contributed to African American males' ability to graduate from high school. Eligibility for participation in semistructured interviews required that participants meet specific criteria. These included being an African American male by birth, having graduated from high school within the last 10 years, having attended an educational institution in an urban setting, being older than 18 years of age, demonstrating fluency in English, and being no older than 28 years of age.

In this section, I explain the approach employed in the present study, elucidating the rationale behind adopting a descriptive basic methodology to fulfill the study's objectives. I detail the selection criteria for participants and outline the overall procedures designed to contribute to the study's outcomes. Additionally, I present the data collection and analysis plans, incorporating tools intended to facilitate the generation of comprehensive data for examination. The chapter concludes by introducing strategies to bolster the credibility of the study's findings and addressing ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research question guided this study:

RQ1: How do African American males, who graduated from urban high schools, describe the factors that contributed towards their academic success?

The complexities of challenges faced by African American students in completing high school are multifaceted. Various external factors beyond the school environment have been scrutinized to comprehend the academic underachievement of African American male students, encompassing historical, community, and home-related influences. These factors present a wide array of challenges that African American males confront even before entering formal education (Cokley, 2016; Morgan & Truman, 2020). The examination of school-related factors extends to the overarching values and expectations the education system holds towards African American students. I focused on exploring the viewpoints of African American males, with the aim of uncovering the factors that contributed to their successful high school completion. The essence of this study lies in its pursuit of understanding the diverse experiences that empowered these students to navigate and succeed in their high school journey. Through an in-depth investigation, I aimed to identify the various pathways that led to successful educational outcomes for these 10 African American male participants, thereby contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on educational equity and achievement.

While existing studies have examined the schooling experiences of African American male students from cultural, structural, racial, community, family, and school perspectives, the voices of those who successfully completed high school in urban settings remain scarce. Although research on the schooling experiences of males of color has been conducted, the limited data documenting the experiences of African American male students necessitates a focused exploration (Howard, 2013). Previous research has predominantly adopted a deficit-based model when documenting the African American

male school experience (Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013). However, I intentionally avoided framing my study within a deficit-based model, aligning with the ongoing effort to shift the focus from African American male failure to success (see Harper, 2015; Howard, 2013; Rowley et al., 2014). Given the scarcity of current research on successful narratives of high school completion among African American males, a qualitative design is deemed suitable to develop a more intricate and comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlighted the appropriateness of qualitative research for exploring the meanings associated with complex social issues.

Descriptive Qualitative Approach

In this qualitative study, I used a descriptive qualitative research approach to explore the schooling experiences of African American males who have graduated from high schools in urban settings. The primary focus was to identify the factors that contributed to the ability of 10 African American male students who successfully completed high school. The descriptive qualitative approach employed in this study aims to uncover and understand the phenomenon of African American male students' high school graduation experiences. Unlike quantitative designs, descriptive qualitative research focuses on interpreting subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on individuals' experiences in the outer world (Caelli et al., 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Percy et al., 2015). This approach is both descriptive and interpretive, allowing for a reflective exploration of participants' perspectives and worldviews.

While phenomenology could be considered as an alternative, the descriptive approach was more suitable for this study. Participants were interviewed based on their

experiences, providing a detailed understanding of the factors influencing their successful high school completion. Semistructured interviews were conducted with African American males who have graduated from urban high schools, delving into their personal insights and illuminating the complexities of their educational journeys. In summary, the purpose of this study was to employ a descriptive qualitative research design to comprehensively explore the factors contributing to the successful high school graduation of African American males in urban settings. This approach was chosen to capture the depth of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Role of the Researcher

I was the primary researcher for this study, and I was committed to approaching this endeavor with a vigilant sense of monitoring in addition to a heightened awareness of potential biases. My role involved obtaining approval from the institutional review board (IRB), identifying and screening potential participants, analyzing the study findings, and presenting the results in a final report. The primary data collection tool was one-on-one interviews, which occurred using the Zoom platforms. Interviews were planned to last approximately 60 minutes, ensuring both privacy and convenience for participants, with specific details decided on a case-by-case basis. During these interviews, my goal was to establish a comfortable atmosphere that encouraged open conversation and the transfer of information. Transparency about the study's purpose was key, aiming to build rapport with each interviewee and assure them of the confidentiality of their participation throughout and after the study.

Upon concluding the interviews, the information obtained was securely stored in a locked container within my residence. Ethical considerations mainly revolved around my shared demographic background as another African American male who graduated from an urban high school. To mitigate potential bias, I acknowledged the differences in time, geographical location, and personal experiences between my graduation over 41 years ago in the Northeast part of the country in addition to the participants' more recent experiences in the Southeast over the last decade. To mitigate my potential bias, I took several steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. This included maintaining detailed and transparent documentation of the research process, offering a clear account of data collection and analysis procedures, and providing rich and thick descriptions of the study setting, participants, and data collection processes.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

I employed purposive sampling as outlined by Patton (2014). The initial step in this approach involved clearly defining the study population, determining inclusion criteria, and selecting the most effective method for participant recruitment. The focus of this study was African American males' high school experiences, specifically those who completed high school in an urban setting within the last 10 years. The purposive sampling strategy was deemed effective for capturing pertinent data from participants in this study. Patton emphasized the rationale and strength of purposive sampling lies in its emphasis on achieving in-depth understanding. Participants of this study met the following criteria: (a) African American males, (b) graduated from high school within the

last 10 years, (c) attended an educational institution located in an urban setting, (d) at least 18 years of age, (e) were fluent in the English language, and (f) no more than 28 years old. I recruited participants from Central Florida, as well as participants from other southern locations within the United States. In addition to using purposeful sampling, I used snowball sampling. This method entailed identifying the initial participant, conducting an interview, and inquiring whether the participant is acquainted with other people who share the study's criteria for participation (Patton, 2014).

For this study, 10 African American males who successfully completed high school were purposefully selected to partake in semistructured interviews, aiming to gather comprehensive data. In qualitative research, the concept of saturation serves as a criterion for determining the point at which data collection or analysis can cease. Saturation is frequently regarded as a crucial methodological element in qualitative studies (Fusch & Ness, 2015). It is achieved when enough information and data have been gathered to replicate the study, and all potential codes and analyses have been exhausted. Considering that the most significant variation in coding tends to occur within the first 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006), a sample size of 12 participants is deemed appropriate when using a semistructured interview guide. In alignment with this rationale, I recruited 10 participants for this study, and data saturation was achieved with this number.

Instrumentation

The data were collected using Zoom interviews, which lasted between 60-90 minutes in duration (Appendix). Prior to presenting the semistructured questions related

to this research study, I first asked participants a standard set of demographic questions to confirm their eligibility for the study and to establish a connection with them.

Demographic questions asked about the participant's age, whether their high school was in an urban area, whether they had graduated from high school and the year of graduation, whether they were currently employed, as well as other related questions. The questions formulated in the semistructured interview guide were used with flexibility, incorporating follow-up questions or probes as needed. This approach aimed to improve the clarity and depth of participants' responses and to maintain a smooth flow in the conversation. The questions that formed the interview guide were developed to explore the educational experiences of African American males. The interview guide was shaped by relevant information gathered from peer-reviewed literature sources and the previously identified conceptual frameworks.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment and enrollment followed a structured, multistep process. After obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB, a multifaceted outreach strategy was implemented. Flyers were distributed across Central Florida in 2-year, 4-year, and graduate institutions, as well as in community spaces frequented by the target population (e.g., coffee shops and record stores). During the summer, fall, and winter of 2024, I distributed information and flyers about my study among friends and family members.

Prospective participants who were referred through these channels contacted the researcher and received a brief overview of the study's purpose. Eligibility screening was conducted at that time, and contact information was exchanged with individuals who

expressed interest and met inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were then emailed the study flyer, informed consent document, and Zoom details, with instructions to reply with their signature and the statement “I consent.” Upon receipt of consent, interview appointments were scheduled and confirmed. Participants who completed the process were encouraged to share information about this study, thereby enabling snowball sampling.

Data Analysis Plan

I transcribed each interview to obtain the necessary data for this study. Once this process was completed, I conducted thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2012) guidelines. These authors advised that this process was necessary as it afforded the researcher an opportunity to identify, organize, and provide insight into different patterns, or themes, of the acquired data. The information was categorized into main themes and minor themes. In consideration of both types of themes, there was also a possibility that a connection between the two could be discovered. Braun and Clarke advised that there were six phases of thematic analysis. I discussed each of the six phases with a brief explanation to clarify the purpose of each stage.

1. **Data Familiarization:** This stage entailed the transcription of the recorded interview, aiming to meticulously capture all submitted information. The process involved a comprehensive review of the data, providing me with an opportunity to gain an initial understanding of the information. It was important to acknowledge that achieving genuine familiarity with the material required multiple attempts before progressing to the next level.

2. **Generating Initial Codes:** This stage involved identifying noteworthy portions of information, often labeled as codes. These codes served as a method of description, providing significant meaning to the collected information.
3. **Generating Themes:** This stage comprised an examination of the codes, allowing me to discern patterns (themes) in the inquiry. Some patterns were crucial, while others did not align with the stated purpose of the analysis. This stage served as a precursor to the next step.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** This step involved a thorough scrutiny of the premises at hand, ensuring the data accurately reflected the information it was based on. This stage also provided an opportunity to refine the themes where possible. Successful refinement led to progression to the fifth level.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** At this stage, the focus was on discussing the meaning and relevance of each theme. The names assigned to the themes provided a true and straightforward reflection of the material. Once achieved, the process advanced to the final step.
6. **Producing the Report:** This step entailed a written summarization of the findings, starting with an introduction to the research question and its respective approach. Each theme was discussed in detail, supported by evidence, to create an understanding of its meaning. Once this was completed, a synopsis was produced, addressing the key points and answering the respective research questions. Finally, the research methodology statement,

encompassing an explanation of data collection and the rationale behind the presented thematic analysis, was included.

This was the process through which I compiled my report, recognizing that not all the information neatly fit together as part of a pattern or theme. This was where the concept of negative data came into play, constituting a crucial aspect of negative case analysis. A negative case analysis involved deliberately examining instances, data, or cases that did not conform to the expected patterns, trends, or themes identified during the analysis. I focused on cases that diverged from the anticipated findings. The purpose of this analysis was to enhance the rigor and validity of qualitative research by exploring exceptions or contradictions to the emerging patterns. Negative cases provided valuable insights, challenged assumptions, and contributed to a more thorough understanding of the research phenomenon. This approach contributed to establishing credibility and trustworthiness in the report by providing additional insight into the research study (Schwandt, 2007).

The thematic analysis was enriched by integrating the conceptual frameworks of CRT and the anti-deficit achievement framework. CRT offered a lens to comprehend racial inequities, challenge biases, and explore counternarratives that empowered marginalized voices. Meanwhile, the anti-deficit achievement framework emphasized the strengths of historically underserved students, particularly Black males. This integration enhanced analytical depth and provided a robust theoretical foundation.

Through CRT, the analysis delved into how race intersected with other identity markers, shaping Black students' educational experiences. It facilitated the exploration of

counternarratives, disrupted conventional understandings of race, and challenged stereotypes. By amplifying marginalized voices and centering the experiences of Black students, CRT enriched the analysis with insights into the barriers and injustices that impacted educational outcomes. The anti-deficit achievement framework complemented CRT by emphasizing assets and resilience, encouraging exploration of how students navigated barriers to success. Incorporating both frameworks allowed for a complex exploration of intersectional dynamics. By centering marginalized voices and emphasizing strengths, this approach provided a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing academic success. Ultimately, integrating these frameworks enriched the analysis with deeper insights into the realities of Black students within the educational system.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Amankwaa (2016) emphasized the essential elements of truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality that every research study must possess to be deemed worthwhile. Trustworthiness, therefore, denotes that the findings of a study should be meaningful and contribute significance rather than consisting of inconsequential information. Schwandt (2007) added another dimension by suggesting that the criteria for establishing trustworthiness in data collection and interpretation involve determining whether the interpretations are credible, truthful, and superior to alternative explanations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) established credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as avenues to establish trustworthiness in a study. In the subsequent

paragraphs, I elaborated on each principle and explained how trustworthiness was ensured in this study.

Credibility

To establish credibility in my study, I focused on ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the reality of the phenomena under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thorough interviews were conducted, lasting 60 to 90 minutes, with a meticulous approach to capturing detailed information, language, and concepts. Prolonged engagement was a key strategy, involving spending sufficient time in the field to comprehend the phenomenon within its context. To achieve saturation, multiple interviews were conducted until no new topics emerged and the data became repetitive, aligning with the broader application of saturation in various qualitative research approaches.

Peer debriefing was crucial to this process, involving ongoing consultation with my chair during both data collection and analysis stages to identify reactivity and process-related issues. This collaborative approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the procedural aspects of data collection and analysis from different perspectives. Negative case analysis further contributed to credibility by addressing disconfirming or negative information. This involved a careful examination of data that deviated from trending patterns, aiming to understand why they did not fit. Any disconfirming evidence was reported and considered in the overall analysis, enhancing the robustness of the study.

Dependability

Dependability, which ensured consistency and replicability of findings, was a crucial aspect of this qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Acknowledging the dynamic nature of human behavior and experiences, replicating the exact results was challenging. Nevertheless, to enhance the study's dependability, I provided detailed descriptions of the procedural approaches and protocols employed, allowing readers to attempt replication and achieve similar outcomes. Descriptive information concerning data gathering, processing, and interpretation procedures enhanced the reliability and consistency of findings when duplicated (Patton, 2014). This transparency in methodology contributed to increased dependability as readers gained insight into the key factors and procedures employed throughout the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research referred to the degree to which the findings of a study were objective, unbiased, and grounded in the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was attained by demonstrating that the study's results faithfully mirrored the voices of the participants or the data sources, rather than being influenced by the researcher's personal predispositions, biases, beliefs, or subjective interpretations. Proactive steps were taken to manage my potential bias and enhance confirmability. This involved acknowledging any preconceived notions about the phenomenon under study. To address and manage bias, reflexive bracketing methods such as memos, bracketing ideas and reactions, and journals were employed throughout all study phases. Reflexive bracketing entailed recognizing how personal involvement could impact study procedures

and outcomes. By employing these methods, I facilitated an increase in confirmability by effectively managing presuppositions, subjectivities, and assumptions. Additionally, I implemented an audit trail. Maintaining an audit trail throughout the study ensured visibility and comprehensibility, enabling readers to connect interpretations and conclusions to the underlying data.

Transferability

Transferability pertained to the degree to which the findings of a study could be extended or applied to similar contexts. The researcher's role was not to provide a transferability index but to present the data in sufficient detail to allow potential users to make their own transferability judgments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The potential for transferability hinged on the researcher's ability to convey depth and clarity in the description of the data. To ensure transferability, I furnished a comprehensive account of the context and significance of the participants, along with thorough coding and analysis of the data. By incorporating thick, rich descriptions such as vignettes and quotations that reflected participants' voices, I enabled readers to make informed decisions about the applicability and transferability of the study results.

Ethical Procedures

Various ethical considerations were implemented to uphold the commitment to avoid causing harm during the research process, as emphasized in ethical integrity (Sanjari et al., 2014). This study was granted IRB approval under approval number 07-07-24-0761664. To maintain ethical integrity, participants were informed through a comprehensive consent form that outlined the research process, explained how their

experiences and the study's outcomes would be used, and provided information on resources should participation lead to psychological distress. Prior to scheduling interviews, participants had ample time to review the consent form, ask questions, and ensure their understanding.

Participants reviewed the form at their own pace, and interviews were scheduled only after they had provided consent. The consent form was sent via email, ensuring accessibility and sufficient time for review. While physical harm was not a concern for participants in this study, the topic had the potential to evoke psychological distress. To address this, participants received prior information about the study, and resources for psychological support were included in the consent form.

As the researcher, I remained mindful of verbal expressions and emotional responses indicating stress during interviews. If intense emotions were expressed, I paused or redirected the interview, and participants were allowed to discontinue at any time. Confidentiality was ensured by sharing collected information, including interviews, only with the dissertation committee and by de-identifying all data. Physical records such as field notes, audiotapes, and transcripts were securely stored in a locked cabinet, while electronic files were password-protected. Transcriptions were coded to de-identify participants, and any identifying information was removed or generalized. Five years after the study's completion, interview transcripts and raw data were scheduled for secure destruction.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological foundation of the study, beginning with the research design and rationale. The study was guided by a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the schooling experiences of African American males who successfully graduated from urban high schools. The focus was on identifying the factors that contributed to their academic success and resilience in navigating educational challenges. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share their insights and lived experiences in depth. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit 10 participants who met clearly defined eligibility criteria, ensuring the relevance of the data to the study's objectives. The chapter also detailed the rationale for selecting this approach, highlighting its suitability for capturing the complexity of the participants' experiences.

The chapter further explained the procedures for data collection and analysis, emphasizing thematic analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2012). It described the steps taken to transcribe, code, and identify themes, as well as the integration of CRT and the anti-deficit achievement framework to enrich the interpretation of findings. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed through strategies ensuring credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, supported by practices such as prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and an audit trail. Ethical considerations were also central to the study's design. Participants were fully informed through a consent process, confidentiality was maintained, and measures were in place to minimize potential distress. By presenting these methodological decisions, the chapter established

the rigor and integrity of the study while laying the groundwork for the presentation of findings in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who have graduated from high schools located in urban settings. The focus of this study was to identify the factors that contributed towards the African American male student's ability to graduate from high school. The research question for this study is as follows: How do African American males, who graduated from urban high schools, describe the factors that contributed towards their academic success?

In this chapter, I provide a description of the participant interview settings, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis. I also explain how themes and topics were identified during the process of data analysis. In addition, I present evidence of trustworthiness and reports the results of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key points.

Setting

All participant interviews were conducted using Zoom. Recruitment materials were distributed through colleges, community spaces, and personal networks to reach potential participants. Eligibility and interest were confirmed through follow-up telephone discussions. Potential participants were informed of the study's purpose during initial conversations. Once participants were deemed eligible and agreed to take part, they received an email containing the study flyer and consent form. Zoom meeting details were provided after the signed consent form was returned.

Participants were reminded at several points that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. A few individuals initially expressed interest in the study but later declined prior to the scheduled interview. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and were informed that if any question caused discomfort, they could choose not to respond or discontinue the interview. During the interviews, participants were first asked demographic questions, followed by the remaining interview questions. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All questions were open-ended to elicit detailed and comprehensive responses.

Demographics

All participants were African American males who had attended and successfully graduated from urban high schools in the southeastern region of the United States. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 27 years, with a mean age of 23. They were either employed professionals, students, or both. Participants reported graduating from high school as early as 2014 and as recently as 2023. Parental educational attainment varied, with the lowest level completed being high school and the highest level completed being undergraduate or graduate studies. Table 1 presents a detailed breakdown of participant demographics.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Occupation	Age	Year of graduation	Highest parental level of education
Participant 1	Professional	27	2014	Graduate Degree (M)
Participant 2	Student	21	2021	Associate of Arts (F), Bachelor of Science in nursing (M)
Participant 3	Student	20	2022	Master of Business Administration (M), Tech School (F)
Participant 4	Student	19	2023	Graduate Degree (M), HS Diploma (F)
Participant 5	Professional	27	2016	Bachelor's Degree (M), HS Diploma (F)
Participant 6	Professional	20	2022	Bachelor's Degree (M), HS Diploma (F)
Participant 7	Professional	26	2016	Bachelor of Arts (F), Master of Arts (M)
Participant 8	Professional	22	2020	Unknown
Participant 9	Student	24	2018	Bachelor of Arts (M & F)
Participant 10	Professional	25	2017	Bachelor of Arts (F), Master of Arts (M)

Data Collection

Interviews for the study began in July 2024 and concluded in November 2024. Approval to begin the study was granted by Walden University's IRB on July 1, 2024 (Approval No. 07-07-24-0761664). The first interview was conducted on July 17, 2024, and the final interview took place on November 4, 2024. In total, 10 participants were interviewed. The data collection process lasted no more than 5 months. During this time, several potential participants initially expressed interest but later declined to participate, which slightly prolonged the timeline for data collection.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom, which accommodated scheduling conflicts and geographical distance. Participants were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded for transcription purposes, and all consented to this procedure. No interviews were video-recorded, and participants' names were not used during the sessions. All interview questions were open-ended and designed to elicit detailed responses. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with recordings concluding after the final question was answered. At the close of each interview, participants were thanked for their contribution and provided with \$20 as a token of appreciation for their time and participation.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2012), provided an opportunity to review, interpret, and make sense of the commonalities within the collected data. Six phases were used to interpret data from the ten interviews conducted for this study. Phase 1, known as data familiarization, involved a thorough review of the

transcripts from each Zoom interview. At this stage, I realized that analyzing or critiquing the data by simply reading each transcript would be overwhelming. To organize the material more effectively, I created an Excel spreadsheet in which each question was notated and the corresponding responses from all participants were recorded. This process not only strengthened my recall of each interview over time but also served to systematically structure the data (Ose, 2016).

During Phase 1, I also reviewed my handwritten notes to capture the sequence of questions asked and to highlight participants' noteworthy responses. I compared the audio recordings of the interviews with their transcriptions to ensure that the essence of each statement was accurately reflected. Interestingly, I later discovered that the method I used to document participants' responses aligned closely with procedures described in Ose (2016). Recording responses from participants one through ten in a structured format appeared to be a logical way to capture data systematically and prepare for theme development.

Phase 2 involved a more detailed approach. Each participant's responses were examined line by line to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. This coding process enabled the researcher to make sense of the data at a granular level (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Through this method, I was able to gain richer insights into the participants' perspectives on the factors that contributed to their academic success during high school. An example of this process is illustrated in Table 2, drawn from the interview with participant 1.

Table 2

Sample of Line-by-Line Coding

Raw data	Line-by-line coding
Q: Can you describe your personal motivation for completing high school?	
A: So, I would, I would say simply stability, self-sufficiency and means of exploring. Like exploring different places and such.	The desire to travel to various places.
Another personal motivation was, you know, a bit of competitiveness, and trying to achieve that.	Competition amongst fellow students.

Phase 3 involved the generation of themes. The line-by-line coding used in Phase 2 evolved into focused themes that were directly related to the research question, or into more straightforward interpretations of the reviewed data. Whereas the previous section employed two columns to organize information, this stage incorporated a third column. The third column contained a streamlined analysis that assisted in identifying emergent themes (Elliott, 2018). The following chart illustrates this process using an excerpt from the interview with Participant 1 (see Table 3). This focused coding helped organize the participants' underlying responses into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions.

Table 3*Sample of Focused Coding*

Raw data	Line-by-line code	Focused coding
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Q: Can you describe your personal motivation for completing high school?

A: So, I would, I would say simply stability, self-sufficiency and means of exploring. Like exploring different places and such.

Economic strength that affords opportunity to travel, etc.

Financial feasibility

Another personal motivation was, you know, a bit of competitiveness, and trying to achieve that.

Competition amongst fellow students

Academic rivalry

Phase 4 focused on reviewing the emerging themes. A new Excel spreadsheet was created to assist in this process, as the original spreadsheet contained a large volume of information. On the new spreadsheet, columns were developed to include the initial codes from each response gathered from all ten participants. A final column labeled “cross-case analysis” was added to help identify components of emerging themes. Through this process, patterns began to surface within participants’ responses (see Ryan, 2012), allowing clusters of themes to be identified in relation to the research question. These clusters provided a meaningful interpretation of the data and contributed to answering the research question.

Phase 5 involved naming and defining the emergent themes after reviewing participants’ responses to the research question. While the themes were related to one another, they did not overlap; rather, each represented a distinct aspect of the data. This

was accomplished through detailed information drawn from individual participant statements. Some themes included subsets to provide greater definition of the overall topic. As discussed in Chapter 3, the names and definitions of themes were intended to provide a clear and accurate reflection of the data. All supporting data were presented to substantiate conclusions within the analysis, and the interconnections between themes were used to strengthen the interpretation of the findings. Table 4 illustrates this process.

Table 4

Sample of Themes and Topics

1. Family and Community Support as Foundational Motivators

Participant # 6 described strong encouragement from his parents and grandparents to stay on the "straight and narrow path." These early influences framed education as essential for independence and a better life.

Subthemes/related topics

- Family expectations and guidance
 - Desire to make family proud and not be a burden
 - Avoidance of failure and dependence
 - Early educational support (pre-school and beyond)
-

Phase 6 was the stage in which a comprehensive report of the analysis was produced in response to the research question. Braun and Clarke (2012) noted that this phase involves constructing a coherent case that directly addresses the research question. In completing this process, three major themes, seven topics, and five minor subthemes were identified. Each theme and topic were independent, yet together they formed a logical and meaningful explanation of the findings. The data collected from the

interviews contained themes that provided a coherent and comprehensive response to the research question.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The research steps outlined in Chapter 3 were rigorously applied to ensure integrity and rigor throughout the study. To demonstrate trustworthiness, the following sections describe how credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were addressed. All phases of analysis were implemented, and excerpts from participant interviews are included to provide transparency in the analytic process. Following the descriptive qualitative research guidelines of Creswell and Poth (2017) further strengthened the study's trustworthiness.

Credibility

In Chapter 3, I discussed the concept of saturation in qualitative research, which in this study was achieved through the completion of ten participant interviews averaging 75 minutes each. Open-ended questions prompted participants to recall situations and feelings related to their academic experiences, and the repetition of responses indicated consistency and credibility in the shared perspectives. Credibility was further supported through accurate transcription of the interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, which provided written transcriptions in addition to audio recordings; the video option was not used. Audio recordings were retained to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions, and handwritten notes were kept to capture noteworthy statements during the interviews. These combined measures ensured accuracy of the data and reinforced the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of one study may be applicable to other settings, circumstances, or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing rich detail and thorough explanations, readers can make independent judgments about whether the results of this study can be applied beyond its original context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that if the findings of one study are relevant to another population experiencing similar conditions, then those findings can be considered transferable. African American males are not the only group to experience higher rates of school disciplinary actions, greater enrollment in special education programs, and reduced participation in advanced placement courses. Research has shown that African American males often face lowered teacher expectations, which can contribute to their increased likelihood of withdrawing from high school. Readers of this study are therefore encouraged to consider these findings and determine whether they may apply to other populations.

Another way transferability may be demonstrated is through identifying factors that contributed to the academic success of high school graduates from other populations. Researchers can compare those factors with the findings of this study to determine whether similar influences were instrumental in shaping academic outcomes across groups.

Dependability

To ensure this study's dependability, each step of the research process was documented methodically. The data analysis also included several peer debriefing and

external review sessions, which helped prevent potential biases from influencing the interpretation of findings. In addition, member checking was conducted on several occasions with participants. For example, when a participant repeated a common refrain, I noted that other participants had expressed the same viewpoint. These practices helped minimize researcher bias and contributed to the study's dependability.

Dependability in this study was further supported through transparency and the maintenance of audit trails. All handwritten notes, Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, and written interview transcripts were retained. Preserving these materials allows another researcher to replicate the process and potentially achieve similar findings. This consistency forms the foundation of dependability in qualitative research, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability was established by grounding the findings in the data collected rather than in preconceived biases. To ensure neutrality in the interpretation of findings (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I relied on extensive analysis of participant interviews to develop themes and topics. An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, documenting the research process and including reflexive journaling to manage potential bias. Recording personal thoughts and reflections during the study helped ensure that personal perspectives did not influence the findings. Conscious efforts to minimize bias also included multiple conversations with a peer reviewer, which encouraged further reflection on the data and reinforced transparency in data collection and analysis. In addition, audio recordings, transcripts, codes, and themes were shared with committee

members for feedback and guidance. Together, these measures enhanced the study's confirmability.

Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed three overarching themes that capture the factors influencing participants' persistence and graduation from high school. Theme 1, family and community support as a driving force for graduation, highlights the foundational role of parents, extended family, and community members, and is presented through two subthemes: clear expectations and accountability, and motivation through pride, pressure, and future aspirations. Theme 2, supportive relationships, mentorship, and representation in school, emphasizes the critical importance of teachers, coaches, administrators, and peers in fostering persistence, and is organized into four subthemes: encouragement, mentorship, and role models; recognition and practical support; peer influence and academic support networks; and representation and the need for culturally responsive education.

Finally, Theme 3, internal motivation, future orientation, and resilience, reflects the ways participants internalized determination and resisted barriers, presented across three subthemes: future orientation and aspirations; internal drive to resist barriers and stereotypes; and resilience through adversity. Together, these themes illustrate the interconnected supports and internal resources that enabled participants to achieve high school graduation despite challenges. Table 5 introduces the list of themes and subthemes.

Table 5*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1. Family and community support as a driving force for graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subtheme 1.1. Clear expectations and accountability • Subtheme 1.2. Motivation through pride, pressure, and future aspirations
Theme 2. Supportive relationships, mentorship, and representation in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subtheme 2.1. Encouragement, mentorship, and role models • Subtheme 2.2. Recognition and practical support • Subtheme 2.3. Peer influence and academic support networks • Subtheme 2.4. Representation and the need for culturally responsive education
Theme 3. Internal motivation, future orientation, and resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subtheme 3.1. Future orientation and aspirations • Subtheme 3.2. Internal drive to resist barriers and stereotypes • Subtheme 3.3. Resilience through adversity

Theme 1. Family and Community Support as a Driving Force for Graduation

Participants consistently identified family and community as the most powerful influences behind their determination to graduate from high school. Parents set clear expectations and established graduation as a nonnegotiable goal, while extended family members and the broader community reinforced these standards. For many participants, this support was both direct, through explicit guidance and encouragement, and indirect, such as the desire to avoid failure, relieve financial burden, or pursue aspirations beyond high school. Together, these elements created an environment where academic success was expected, supported, and ultimately achieved.

This theme is organized into two subthemes: (a) Clear expectations and accountability, which captures how parents, extended family, and communities set firm standards and reinforced educational success and (b) motivation through pride, pressure, and future aspirations, which reflects how participants internalized these expectations, drawing motivation from a desire to make their families proud, avoid disappointment, and envision life beyond high school graduation.

Subtheme 1.1. Clear Expectations and Accountability

Across participants, one of the strongest and most consistent motivators was the clarity with which families set expectations. Parents often framed graduation as compulsory rather than optional, shaping the belief that completion was the only acceptable outcome. Participant 1 explained, “It was kind of like they kind of made it like I had no other option to graduate. It's like you're going. You're gonna go through this, you're gonna go every day.” Similarly, Participant 3 reflected, “To be frank, it wasn't a decision. It was, I was told you're graduating now... We've made these sacrifices. We put everything in place for you to graduate. There's no reason you shouldn't, and I thoroughly agreed.” These statements highlight the nonnegotiable nature of graduation, leaving little room for disengagement or withdrawal.

Extended family members were also deeply involved in communicating and reinforcing these expectations. Participant 6 described the influence of his grandparents, “They've always been there. They try to be positive role models for me, educational-wise, and they've always pushed for me to succeed.” Families worked collectively to

emphasize educational success, reminding participants that their academic journey was shared by the household as a whole.

The broader community reinforced these expectations, both directly and indirectly. Participant 2 reflected on his neighborhood, “A good amount of people that live around here understand the value of at least graduating high school...my neighborhood has motivated me. It's there's some people that I don't want to be like which motivated me, you know.” Even when framed through avoidance of negative role models, community influence contributed to participants’ sense of accountability. Together, family and community created an environment in which graduation was understood as a standard milestone rather than an individual choice.

Subtheme 1.2. Motivation Through Pride, Pressure, and Future Aspirations

In addition to clear expectations, participants described a deep sense of motivation rooted in pride, pressure, and long-term aspirations. Many students emphasized the importance of making their families proud and avoiding the shame of failure. Participant 10 shared,

I couldn't get bad grades...a ‘C’ or below was unacceptable. Everyone around me really not only wanted me to succeed, but believed that I could, and it just set that standard, set that bar at the very least. I will be a high school graduate.”

This sense of accountability eventually transformed into a forward-looking commitment. As Participant 10 further reflected, “it wasn't so much about the graduation thing. It was just about what comes afterward.”

For some students, motivation was fueled by pressure that came in the form of doubt or challenge. Participant 5 recalled, “My personal motivation was my parents telling me basically, that I wasn't going to...graduate at the rate I was going...they challenged me by giving me like the negative aspect of it to make me like believe in myself.” In other cases, the drive to succeed stemmed from financial responsibility and the desire not to place additional burdens on the family. Participant 3 explained, “The only thing I really, really ever worried about was paying for it... I got that 30, and the money started coming in. The offers started coming in...so, I already knew my only way was through my brain.”

Graduation was also framed as a steppingstone to broader goals, rather than an endpoint in itself. Participant 1 described how completing high school meant “stability, self-sufficiency, and means of exploring...different places and such.” Participant 4 similarly emphasized, “Completing high school was to ensure that I was able to get into college and have a steady career afterwards.” These reflections demonstrate that, for many, family expectations were not limited to high school completion but extended toward envisioning education as a pathway to independence and professional success.

In sum, family and community support operated as a dual force: first, by setting uncompromising expectations and creating accountability, and second, by inspiring students to meet or exceed those expectations through pride, pressure, and aspirations for the future. Whether expressed through explicit directives, emotional reinforcement, financial realities, or long-term vision, participants consistently credited their families and communities as central motivators in their determination to complete high school.

Theme 2. Supportive Relationships, Mentorship, and Representation in School

Participants consistently emphasized that their high school success was deeply influenced by the relationships they built with teachers, coaches, administrators, and peers. These relationships provided much more than academic instruction; they offered mentorship, encouragement, recognition, accountability, and cultural affirmation. Educators and peers alike became critical support systems, motivating students to persist, challenging deficit-based stereotypes, and reinforcing the belief that academic achievement was both possible and expected. For many, these relationships created a sense of belonging and care that extended beyond the classroom, shaping their confidence, goals, and academic identity.

This theme is organized into four interrelated subthemes: (a) encouragement, mentorship, and role models, (b) recognition and practical support, (c) peer influence and academic support networks, and (d) representation and the need for culturally responsive education. Together, these subthemes illustrate how a web of relationships and representation served as a protective and motivating force, shaping the persistence and graduation of African American male students.

Subtheme 2.1: Encouragement, Mentorship, and Role Models

One of the strongest findings in this theme was the extent to which teachers and staff encouraged students to persist and reject negative stereotypes. Teachers were not merely academic instructors but advocates who reminded students of their potential and worked actively to dismantle deficit-based assumptions about African American males. Participant 4 recalled, “the faculty and teachers there are very encouraging, because they

want us to break those stereotypes, and they don't want us to be part of a statistic. That is not us.” This reflects a school culture in which educators intentionally communicated high expectations and framed academic achievement as resistance against limiting societal narratives.

Mentorship also played a central role. Several participants described how teachers went beyond the classroom to guide and inspire them intellectually. Participant 7 remembered, “I would, you know, sometimes stay after school, talk to him about different gods and like different philosophies... Honestly, if it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't be as much of a Greek mythology geek as I am now.” In this instance, the teacher not only broadened the student's academic curiosity but also left a lasting impression that shaped his identity and interests beyond high school. Such examples demonstrate how mentorship allowed students to see themselves as capable of engaging with complex ideas, thereby strengthening their sense of intellectual confidence.

The impact of long-term teacher-student relationships was also profound. Participant 3 described the influence of a teacher who supported him for several years, I had one teacher who was with me from 7th to the 12th grade...she encouraged open discussions where we could disagree but kept it respectful and just let each other hear different viewpoints. But she never influenced us to pick a side. She more just asked us questions to get us to think, because I believe it's very important to teach people how to think, but never to teach them what to think. This teacher's willingness to foster respectful dialogue encouraged critical thinking, a skill that the participant recognized as valuable well beyond high school.

Coaches also emerged as central figures who provided both discipline and emotional support. Participant 2 reflected, "...my Coach...he was kind of like my dad at school, not to take away from my dad, but...let me say, Uncle, cause that's kind of what it was. He looked out for me." This statement underscores the familial role that coaches often assumed, functioning as mentors who monitored academic performance, checked on students' well-being, and provided guidance similar to a parental figure.

Formal mentorship programs also served as safety nets for participants who struggled academically. Participant 5 recalled, "...they put me in a club slash program...Where they would give us mentors, and we would also be mentees, and we would have a chance to move up to become mentors...That played a big role in me moving forward." His description illustrates how structured mentorship created accountability and progression, with students first receiving support and then being given opportunities to mentor others. This progression not only motivated students to improve their academic performance but also instilled leadership skills and a sense of responsibility for peers.

Together, these examples demonstrate that encouragement, mentorship, and role modeling by teachers and coaches played a pivotal role in shaping the participants' high school trajectories. Educators served as sources of inspiration, intellectual guides, and extended family figures who nurtured resilience and self-belief.

Subtheme 2.2. Recognition and Practical Support

In addition to encouragement and mentorship, participants emphasized the importance of recognition and practical support from school staff. Recognition of

students' achievements, particularly during milestone events, reinforced their confidence and validated their academic abilities. Participant 6 explained, "...my capstone research group presentation, that we had, and my solo presentation...apparently, I did great. Apparently, I was like one of his best students that, like performed...that was in Mr. (name redacted) class." This experience was transformative, as it allowed him to overcome anxiety about public speaking and discover new confidence in his abilities. Similarly, Participant 10 recounted his success in an advanced placement exam,

I ended up passing that AP Exam. I got the highest, or second highest grade in the class...I'm kind of a competitive person, so it just helped me...get a little bit of confidence in what I knew, what I learned, and it was just nice to see that that I got a good grade.

For both participants, recognition during these moments strengthened their academic self-concept and reinforced the belief that they were capable of excelling in rigorous settings.

Practical support from staff also had a lasting influence. Teachers and administrators often intervened to ensure that students stayed on track, providing resources, flexibility, and opportunities. Participant 4 described how his teacher guided students through scholarship applications, "Miss (name redacted) helped all the seniors get scholarships. She let us know what schools are best for certain majors. She was a great help. My senior year, she helped me get a \$10,000 scholarship." Such support addressed structural barriers to postsecondary access, ensuring students could pursue higher education without being constrained by financial obstacles.

For others, support came in more subtle, everyday ways. Participant 5 remembered,

I see that one of your classes you didn't go to, so stop by my office, and we'll have lunch...They're like, Yeah, I understand. You could sit here and study from this period, I'll write you a pass and send you to that class when it's time to go.

Take that test but just make sure you study.

This interaction, though simple, reflected a teacher's willingness to balance accountability with compassion, offering him the resources and encouragement needed to recover academically.

At a broader level, participants described the staff as dependable, caring, and invested in their well-being. Participant 3 remarked, "the staff loved everyone, everybody. Now I'm not saying they, you know, every teacher was going out of their way and doing the most, but they all did their jobs, and they were there when you needed them." Participant 5 also noted the significance of having leaders who modeled success,

Seeing someone that attended school themselves, that was around us every day, who had a Master's, a Doctorate...to encourage young African American males.

To do better, by seeing better? So, you want to become better. You want to do better.

These accounts demonstrate how recognition and practical support provided by school staff, whether through celebrating accomplishments, assisting with scholarships, or simply being consistently available, strengthened participants' motivation to persevere.

Subtheme 2.3. Peer Influence and Academic Support Networks

Participants consistently described peers as central motivators in their high school experiences, shaping both their academic identity and persistence. Peers were viewed as sources of accountability, encouragement, and academic assistance, functioning much like family and community support. These relationships fostered a sense of belonging and collective responsibility for success, where friends not only encouraged one another to attend school but also modeled achievement and created healthy forms of competition.

For some participants, peers were directly responsible for keeping them in school. Participant 5 reflected on how friends consistently checked on him and encouraged attendance,

I had a couple of friends that would always just check on me whenever I walked on the campus, like they would text me before I even get there. Hey, where are you gonna be at? I'm gonna slide by. I'm gonna see what's up with you. See how you are doing. You know, I know how things go at home. So, you feel me, and they would tell me like those things, and even before I even get to school like the day before or the weekend. They'll text me, 'Hey, you coming to school?' and I'd be like, I don't know, man, I don't really feel like getting up out of bed and going...But they just kept me, like eager to go, and see them and just see how they're doing, and they were actually focused in school because they were doing good in school.

Peers also pushed participants academically through competition and shared standards of excellence. Participant 1 explained,

I was like at the top of the class in terms of like grading scores. It was pretty satisfying, I think there was quite a bit of competitiveness amongst, you know, some of my classmates, and it kind of helped push me to want to do better.

For some, the pressure was less about outscoring peers and more about avoiding the embarrassment of falling behind. As Participant 3 admitted,

I wouldn't say directly, like, Hey, we gotta graduate cause again we weren't worried about not graduating. I'd say the only way any of them could have influenced me directly would be the same embarrassment I would have felt if I didn't graduate, and they did. I know that that probably sounds terrible, but I'd be embarrassed. It would be embarrassing.

Peers also played a direct role in supporting one another academically, providing tutoring and collaborative help with assignments. Participant 5 recalled,

We know that you don't got it. We know that you don't know how to do it. And they'll be jumping me, but when they sit down and they start like showing me exactly how it's done. I'll be like Whoa Bro, like, I didn't know it was that easy. Like, yeah, like, I had to learn from this person or that person.

Participant 6 reinforced this perspective, describing how his circle of friends reinforced his focus on schoolwork,

We didn't mess with like a rough crowd or anything. So yeah, they definitely did help bolster me up. And we did help each other with, like certain assignments and whatnot. Yeah, yeah, now. I guess they just kind of kept me focused on education itself.

The importance of surrounding oneself with academically oriented peers was clear. Participant 6 noted,

I mean, a lot of them were smart. A lot of my friends that I had were really like, really smart, like, we're all like top 100 students. So, that kind of like kept me on that path to just keep my education up, you know.

Others emphasized structured groups like the National Honor Society. Participant 4 recalled, "Yes, I was a part of the National Honor Society, so we honestly helped each other out to make sure that everybody kept that GPA, so we could graduate."

These peer relationships often extended beyond high school, creating lifelong bonds of motivation and encouragement. Participant 5 reflected, "I still talk to all of those people, my teachers, my brothers from high school, my 'Step' brothers from high school. I still talk to all of them today, and they just keep my motivation going even now." For him, the influence of peers not only shaped high school achievement but continues to impact his adult life,

I just recall all the stuff that made me the person I am today, and whenever I see somebody falling behind or just feeling like they don't, they don't want to be there, you know whether it be a practice or a class, or even just walking through the halls like I end up sitting there and motivating them and trying to push them to do better.

Together, these accounts illustrate that peer groups acted as academic support networks holding each other accountable, reinforcing high standards, providing tutoring, and sustaining motivation through both camaraderie and competition. For the

participants, peers were not only classmates but partners in building an academic identity and ensuring high school completion.

Subtheme 2.4. Representation and the Need for Culturally Responsive Education

Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of cultural representation and the availability of culturally responsive educational experiences. For many, the presence or absence of African American male role models and culturally relevant curriculum shaped how they viewed their own potential, how connected they felt to school, and whether they believed academic success was truly within their reach.

Several participants explained that seeing tangible examples of success among African Americans was crucial. Participant 10 described the challenge of seeking role models,

It can look kind of bleak if you know, you're trying to...graduate high school. Then, you know, maybe you'll have college after that. But either way, you're just trying to find just some examples, of people who've done, people who look like you and have done what you've done. I'd say don't give up on looking because it exists. It's there. Maybe it's not right in front of you. Maybe you do have to do a little bit more digging. But it's better than just going through it, thinking that you know, not seeing somebody being able to achieve what you want to achieve. It looks like you don't. I would say you don't have to settle for that. There are examples out there, and you, all you have to do is take the time.

For this participant, the absence of visible role models risked creating hopelessness, while the presence of successful examples of African American achievement helped affirm that

graduation and further education were attainable. Similarly, Participant 6 stressed the value of African American male teachers,

I don't want to say like typecasting teachers or anything. But I definitely do think African American male role model would definitely have helped a lot for me and other African American peers that I know of. It would definitely have helped a lot to have somebody to go to. So that we would have someone to somewhat understand what it is that we're going through.

These words illustrate the deep need participants felt for mentors who could both reflect their identities and understand their lived realities. Several participants also recalled the impact of administrators who modeled high achievement themselves. Participant 4 reflected on one such leader,

They held themselves at a high standard, and they brought us up with them...like Dr. (name redacted), who is now the principal at (name redacted) High School. He got his doctorate while he was at (name redacted) and it was very inspirational as a young Black male, to see that another Black male could do something and still be around us. It just showed that he cared about us, and not just the job that paid him.

This testimony highlights how representation in leadership roles not only motivates but transforms the school climate, providing daily, visible confirmation that advanced academic success is possible for African American males. Participant 2 described his coach as,

Kind of like my dad at school, not to take away from my dad, but he was... You okay, how you doing? You doing your work? Make sure you see me after, you know that type of thing...let me not say Dad, let me say Uncle, cause that's kind of what it was. He was a uncle, and he looked out for me.

Such relationships embodied a culturally resonant style of mentorship rooted in care and accountability, reinforcing both belonging and achievement.

Beyond role models, participants also identified the need for culturally relevant curriculum and programs. Many noted they had little to no exposure to African American history or traditions in their schooling, while those who did described the impact as transformative. Participant 7 recalled taking a class centered on African American history that included a trip to the National Mall in Washington, D.C.,

I'm taking a class...that incorporates our history...not just because, you know, I mean, yes, it's a credit...But it's the fact that you know they made this class specifically for African, and I won't say specifically for African Americans. But just the focus was African Americans... So after that, you know, I felt seen, I felt like, I'm like, okay...They actually want students to accurately learn history and not, you know, just be fed on what textbooks...that we read and we write down.

This sense of being “seen” validated his identity while affirming that school leaders cared about representing his cultural heritage. Participant 10 also described how reading Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Why We Can’t Wait* as part of a summer assignment inspired him, “I remember thinking at first, before I read it, like, Oh, this is gonna be...Basically, I fell in love with that book. It was amazing. I’ve read it twice since then.”

Others pointed to longstanding traditions that cultivated pride in cultural identity. Participant 5 described his involvement in a cultural event at his high school that had been running for decades,

I was a part of SGA, but our SGA is a little different. I did, Mister Sophomore, Mr. Junior, and Mr. (name redacted) High School, which is something of a cultural event that we do at the great (name redacted) High School. It's something that started way, way back in 1947...So, it's a (name redacted) school tradition.

For him, participating in this tradition reinforced his sense of belonging in a school community that celebrated African American heritage.

The most powerful example of cultural engagement came from Participant 5, who described how stepping, a historically African American art form, became central to his motivation and persistence,

I probably wouldn't even be in school. I probably would have dropped out in the 9th grade year if it wasn't for step. It was an amazing club to be in. It taught me discipline, it taught me dedication, it taught me time management... That was like probably my best thing that kept me in school...It was my biggest motivation.

He went on to explain how the step team created a sense of family, "...a whole bunch of brothers. I have like 21 brothers, and step to me is like I had my family there...when I didn't have the support at home, I can go there and know that I have that." For this participant, culturally rooted extracurricular involvement not only promoted academic persistence but also filled a gap in social and emotional support.

At the same time, participants highlighted the challenges of navigating schools where cultural identity was marginalized or underrepresented. Participant 10, who attended a predominantly White school, reflected, “It was overwhelmingly white. It was a little hard to fit in because of that...more teachers who look like me would have helped, for sure.”

Similarly, participant 2 noted how the dominant culture in his school shaped the learning environment,

The high school that I went to was probably one of the better high schools in the area for sure. It was full of Caucasian kids, it's very White-dominated...So, a lot of times we were experiencing, the Black kids that were there, we were experiencing the same things that they were in terms of learning...So, they pushed us just like they did. I wouldn't say just like them, but kind of similarly.

By contrast, Participant 4, who attended a predominantly Black school, described a supportive environment where educators intentionally encouraged students to break stereotypes,

We were definitely considered one of the quote unquote hood schools. The ghetto school, because we were in the middle of a predominantly black area...I would say that the faculty and teachers there are very encouraging, because they want us to break those stereotypes.

Taken together, these contrasting experiences underscore how the racial composition of schools and the presence or absence of culturally responsive practices shaped participants' sense of identity, belonging, and motivation.

In sum, participants made clear that representation and cultural responsiveness were not peripheral but central to their academic journeys. Seeing African American male leaders succeed, engaging with content that reflected their cultural histories, and experiencing mentorship rooted in culturally informed care all strengthened their belief in their own potential. Where these elements were missing, students often felt isolated or disconnected. But where representation and cultural responsiveness were present, participants described them as transformative, affirming, and essential to sustaining their academic success.

Theme 3. Internal Motivation, Future Orientation, and Resilience

The determination to graduate was deeply internalized among participants, who viewed high school completion as a first step toward broader goals. Their motivation was not only fueled by aspirations for college, careers, or family roles, but also by the refusal to conform to negative stereotypes. Importantly, this internal drive was sharpened and tested by adversity, as participants faced barriers ranging from racial bias to lack of representation and family discord. This theme is presented in three subthemes: (a) Future orientation and aspirations, (b) internal drive to resist barriers and stereotypes, and (c) resilience through adversity.

Subtheme 3.1. Future Orientation and Aspirations

Participants consistently framed graduation as only “the bare minimum” and expressed determination to pursue college, entrepreneurship, military service, or family roles beyond high school. Participant 9 explained, “...it was never, if I’m gonna graduate, it [was] what’s next?” For him, graduation was not a question of possibility but of

inevitability, with the military serving as a pathway to fund his college education.

Participant 8 described how his ambition was fixed even before high school:

“...my goal was always set from the beginning, not even in high school, since middle school...My goal was to be wealthy enough to sustain myself and be in a family. That’s really it. And if I get, you know, a little money on the side from passive income. I’ll do that, too.”

This vision of self-sufficiency and financial independence reflects a forward-looking orientation that gave meaning to his persistence.

Others stressed that graduation was only one part of a larger journey. Participant 4 captured this goal when he said,

I plan to do even better. As a Black, or as an African American male, high school was the first step, not my last step. It’s only one part of my journey, and I continue to strive for more to represent my community.

Similarly, Participant 2 connected success to broader life lessons, “...make sure that’s important to you... going beyond what is normal is important to you...being better than those that are around you, life is a competition, everything is a competition.”

These reflections show how participants drew motivation not just from immediate academic milestones but from longer-term life goals, whether college, careers, or becoming a father and role model. Participant 9 underscored this future orientation when he noted, “A lot of my peers motivated me, honestly, just not to be like them. Yeah. Unfortunately, a lot of my friends didn’t have a strong Black male influence.”

Several also linked their aspirations to family roles. Participant 8 said he wanted “to be in a family,” with the implication of setting a standard of success for his future children. Participant 3 suggested community-based mentoring programs could fill gaps for boys without fathers,

Our community would benefit more from...Father-Son type mentoring, like adopt a kid...they show them things like, take them fishing, or show them how to tie a tie. But they’re not just teaching those skills. But they’re also giving them the chance to be around other men in that type of environment and giving them role models.

These accounts illustrate how aspirations extended beyond individual advancement, encompassing a desire to create generational change and provide guidance for others.

Subtheme 3.2. Internal Drive to Resist Barriers and Stereotypes

While aspirations shaped their outlook, participants also framed motivation as resistance against barriers and societal stereotypes. Participant 8 declared, “My personal motivation is just not to be a statistic...don’t fall to what everyone else is saying about...the average African American male...Things like that is what strived me to...go through high school and graduate.” This refusal to “fall behind like the rest” reflects how deeply participants resisted being reduced to negative expectations. At the same time, Participant 7 emphasized that motivation could also be nurtured through compassionate teaching,

Every kid in school has potential...when it comes to African Americans, it's a little hard, based on...our living situation, our family situation, our upbringing, all that. And, I guess if a teacher could be more understanding and be more willing to help. It would give...that extra motivation, that extra boost of morale...that could be very influential and very helpful in their life.

These two perspectives, refusing to become “a statistic” and needing teachers to provide care and belief, illustrate the dual nature of internal drive: both as resistance to external barriers and as something that flourishes when nurtured by educators and mentors.

Participants also identified service to others as part of their motivation. Participant 3 explained, “I want to be someone that other people look to. I want to be someone reliable that other people can look to, that can support them in their time of need...I want to be a good man.” Likewise, Participant 5 reflected on his transformation,

My biggest goal was to just graduate from high school...But then I began to care about education...because that would give me the platform to say to someone in need of help that you can achieve despite the obstacles... I always wanna uplift people, and high school helped me to do that.

For these participants, internal motivation was not only about personal advancement but also about becoming a source of inspiration, care, and guidance for others.

Subtheme 3.3. Resilience through Adversity

Participants' motivation was not cultivated in a vacuum; it was shaped by the challenges they endured inside and outside of school. Many described adverse

circumstances at home, including divorce, separation, or relocation, that made stability difficult. Others faced discrimination, marginalization, or the sting of being singled out because of their race. Participant 3, for instance, admitted that he was sometimes “the butt of jokes due to the color of his skin.” Participant 10, who attended a predominantly Caucasian school, explained the toll of an unwelcoming environment,

Inside of school...sometimes it didn't feel as welcoming, or it just didn't feel like, sometimes the environment didn't feel as welcoming. It was up and down. It wasn't consistent, I'll say that. I was lucky, like I said before, I was able to find a few friends like me. Other black men who made it, you know...it helped make the contrast as sharp as it could have been without them.

The lack of African American male teachers further deepened this sense of isolation. Participant 10 reflected, “more teachers who look like me would have helped, for sure.” For him and others, the absence of visible role models was felt as a void, reinforcing the urgency of representation as a means of affirmation and guidance.

Identity also played a critical role in students' resilience. Some participants covered aspects of cultural pride through curriculum or programs, while others felt that cultural studies were missing entirely, sometimes deliberately so. Participant 10 wished his school had offered a Black student union, underscoring the need for institutionalized spaces of affirmation. Participant 6 noticed how few African American students were in his classrooms, while Participant 4 took pride in the history and traditions of his predominantly African American high school.

Several participants recounted discriminatory treatment in classrooms. Participant 2 reflected,

Whether they stated it or not, the way that a teacher would speak to a black child and a child of another race I feel it would be different...my teachers have always like, may have tried to make it seem like I needed some extra help like I was kind of slow or something.

Participant 9 shared a similar frustration, describing how his confidence clashed with teacher expectations, “When I would butt heads with certain teachers, having that level of confidence that I would have, and some just would not respond to it very well. And that would cause problems.”

Despite these challenges, participants relied on their determination and peer support to persevere. They came to understand that resilience required navigating not just coursework but also stereotypes, bias, and uneven treatment. These experiences solidified their motivation and affirmed their belief that succeeding meant pushing back against structures not built for them.

Negative Case Analysis

Although participants’ narratives largely converged around the importance of family and community expectations, supportive school relationships, and internal motivation, a few discrepant cases emerged that added depth and variation to the findings. For instance, while most participants emphasized encouragement and pride as primary motivators, one participant described how his parents challenged him with doubt about his ability to graduate. This form of negative reinforcement contrasted with the

broader theme of encouragement but still contributed to persistence by fueling a determination to prove himself capable. Similarly, although many participants highlighted pride and accountability to their families, another participant emphasized financial pressure as his principal motivator, describing his focus on securing scholarships to avoid burdening his parents.

Experiences with representation also varied. Several participants reported feeling isolated in predominantly White schools with few African American role models, whereas one participant who attended a predominantly African American high school described an environment where teachers consistently encouraged students to break stereotypes. Finally, although extended family involvement was a consistent theme, a small number of participants indicated that peers or school staff, rather than extended family, played the central role in sustaining their academic motivation.

These discrepant cases do not diminish the overall findings; instead, they highlight the diversity of pathways through which African American males persisted toward high school graduation. They underscore the complexity of motivational factors and suggest that, while certain influences were shared across participants, academic success can also be fostered through alternative forms of support, pressure, or representation. Overall, these small discrepancies were incorporated into the results, highlighting overlapping dimensions of influence that further enrich the understanding of participants' experiences.

Summary

This chapter presented the interview settings, participant demographics, data collection procedures, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness, along with the themes that emerged from the data. Charts were included to illustrate the coding methodology, key themes, and parental educational achievements. The chapter also noted that interviews were conducted with 10 participants, which were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure a thorough understanding of their responses. These processes supported the presentation of the themes and subthemes.

The findings from this study provide a detailed understanding of how African American males who graduated from urban high schools described the factors contributing to their academic success. Participants consistently emphasized that their persistence and eventual graduation were shaped by a combination of external support and internal motivation. Family and community support emerged as a foundational influence. Parents set clear, nonnegotiable expectations for graduation, while extended family members and community contexts reinforced accountability. This support operated in two ways: through explicit guidance and demands for success, and through the motivation to make family members proud, avoid disappointment, and pursue goals beyond high school.

Supportive relationships within schools were also central. Teachers, coaches, administrators, and peers provided encouragement, mentorship, recognition, and practical resources that motivated participants to stay engaged academically. Educators not only offered instruction but also acted as role models, advocates, and sources of cultural

affirmation. Peers created networks of accountability and competition that bolstered persistence, while representation and culturally responsive practices helped participants see their identities and aspirations reflected in the school environment.

Finally, participants described the role of internal motivation, future orientation, and resilience in their academic success. Graduation was consistently framed as the minimum expectation and the first step toward broader goals such as higher education, careers, or family responsibilities. Students resisted negative stereotypes and societal barriers, often viewing persistence as an act of defiance against deficit narratives. Adversity, including family instability, discrimination, and lack of representation, was acknowledged, but participants emphasized resilience, self-determination, and peer support as key factors that allowed them to persist and succeed.

In essence, participants described their academic success as the product of intersecting support and motivations: the firm expectations of family and community, the encouragement and representation provided by educators and peers, and their own internal drive to achieve and transcend challenges. The next chapter discusses how the findings are interpreted, the limitations encountered during the study, and the implications for promoting positive social change. It also offers recommendations for future research and concludes with a summary of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Introduction

Research has shown that African American males often experience marginalized or hostile learning environments that do not increase the likelihood of academic success (Conlin & Villavicencio, 2025). Compared to African American females and to Caucasian and Asian males and females, African American males living in urban areas are less likely to achieve academically. They are disproportionately represented in high school dropout rates, have lower graduation rates and grade point averages, and are overrepresented in special education while underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement classes (Hines et al., 2020). These data highlight the challenges African American males face in the K–12 school system. Therefore, it was important to explore the successful experiences of African American males who graduated from high school. The purpose of this study was to examine the schooling experiences of African American males who have graduated from high schools located in urban settings. The focus of this study was to identify the factors that contributed towards the African American male student's ability to graduate from high school.

The findings of this study revealed that African American males who graduated from urban high schools attributed their success to a combination of external supports and internal motivation. Family and community set firm expectations and reinforced accountability, while teachers, coaches, administrators, and peers provided encouragement, mentorship, and culturally responsive support that fostered persistence and a sense of belonging. At the same time, participants emphasized their own internal

drive, future orientation, and resilience, framing graduation as both a minimum expectation and a steppingstone toward broader aspirations. Together, these intersecting influences created the foundation for participants to overcome barriers, resist negative stereotypes, and ultimately achieve academic success. IN this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the findings, discuss the study's limitations, present recommendations for further research, outline the research implications, and conclude the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study generated a comprehensive understanding of the factors that supported the 10 participants as they pursued their high school diplomas. These participants shared their experiences to provide insight into the conditions that contributed to their success, in contrast to the challenges faced by many other African American males under similar circumstances. I discuss these findings in greater depth through an examination of the study's themes.

Theme 1. Family and Community Support as a Driving Force for Graduation

This theme highlights the importance of family in the academic success of high school students. The concept of family extends beyond the nuclear model consisting solely of parents and siblings. For the purposes of this study, family also includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other extended relatives. In addition to family, community members were also integral, as they provided support to participants on their path toward academic success. Cross (2020) noted that children raised in homes with both biological parents tend to perform better academically than those from other family structures. However, only 40% of African American children live with two parents, and

nearly half live with only their mother (Johns, 2016). The majority of participants in this study lived with both biological parents, while a smaller number lived with only their biological mother or father. This statistic did not appear to be detrimental to the participants, as nearly all reported receiving motivation from both nuclear and extended family members. When family support was lacking, community members stepped in to fill the gap and provide this essential encouragement. Wint et al. (2022) found that the likelihood of high school graduation increases when family or community members provide support for African American males.

When considering the idea of resources available to African American males, participants identified motivation, role modeling, mentoring, and encouragement as central factors. They reported receiving these forms of support in great abundance throughout their high school experiences. For most participants, graduation was not viewed as optional but rather as the only acceptable outcome. This expectation became so deeply ingrained that participants often viewed graduation as a steppingstone to future life goals. Huguley et al. (2020) affirmed that African American parents often rely on familial support to help children overcome perceived inequities within the K–12 school system. Some participants noted that their parents used incentives such as financial rewards for earning high grades. Others emphasized their desire to make their families and communities proud of their achievements. As Chung et al. (2020) observed, a student's failure to achieve academically can negatively affect both the family and the broader community. In line with this, participants in the current study expressed a determination not to become a burden to others.

When discussing role models, participants frequently identified family members who served as their academic inspirations. Several indicated that their parents or other relatives functioned as role models, reinforcing the idea that sources of motivation often existed within their own homes (Ahn et al., 2020). This finding is significant given that much of the responsibility for the perceived lack of academic achievement among African American males has historically been placed on parents (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). In this study, parents not only set expectations but also planted seeds of inspiration that motivated participants to pursue their aspirations. These messages affirmed that academic achievement—and indeed, any goal—was within their reach. As Wilder (2020) explained, parental belief in their children’s capabilities fosters resilience and ambition. This belief reflects the essence of the anti-deficit achievement framework, which emphasizes identifying and cultivating strengths rather than focusing on deficits (Stevens, 2021).

Theme 2. Supportive Relationships, Mentorship, and Representation in School

The main ideas within this theme included school relationships, mentorship, positive peer influences, academic identity, culturally responsive education, and the importance of same-race and same-sex representation in the classroom. Participants emphasized the value of teachers who demonstrated sensitivity to students’ needs, noting that educators who could recall their own adolescent experiences were better equipped to connect with and support their students. This aligns with Bredmar (2020), who found that teachers who reflect on their own emotional experiences can use those insights as data to inform their professional learning. Participants also highlighted the lasting impact of

teachers who constructed a supportive environment through everyday gestures, such as checking on students, making time outside of class, and balancing accountability with compassion, which were viewed as powerful demonstrations of care. These strong connections instilled confidence in students and reinforced the perspective of Warren et al. (2022), who argued that positive school relationships increase the likelihood of academic productivity among African American male students.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, African American students comprise 15% of all students within the K–12 school system, while African American teachers represent only 7% of the workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This disparity highlights a significant representation gap in education, suggesting that many African American students may lack access to same-race teachers who could foster culturally affirming connections that enhance engagement and academic achievement. Students and teachers of the same race often share stronger bonds, and that the expectation of improved academic performance among students is frequently realized in these relationships (Gottfried et al., 2021). Relationships between Black educators and Black students have been beneficial for both parties since African Americans were first allowed to attend school, as explained by McKinney de Royston et al. (2021). Several participants in this study echoed this point by expressing a desire to experience the presence of African American male teachers in a variety of roles within their classrooms. One participant described his coach as resembling a “father or uncle” figure in his life, illustrating the significance of having trusted male role models.

These kinds of relationships (Wilder, 2020) are meaningful, desirable, and necessary to challenge the stranglehold of negative stereotypes that persist around African American male students (Smith & Hope, 2020). Extending the father–son frame of reference, it is important to remember that every African American male student is still the child of two adults within the broader community, even if he is on the verge of adulthood. This perspective underscores the significance of the appeal for educators to recall their own experiences at the age of 16 or 17, as such reflection can foster sensitivity to the needs of their students.

Participants also reflected on the broader social and cultural messages surrounding their identities. One participant emphasized the need for his peers to resist the pressure to pursue careers as rappers, suggesting instead that students should channel their energy into becoming successful in ways that would benefit the community. Brooms et al. (2021) advised that minority youth who enroll in college can serve as mentors, role models, and leaders for middle and high school students in their communities, offering tangible pathways to success. Another participant acknowledged that his confidence sometimes created conflicts with certain teachers, while others noted that some classroom interactions may have been influenced by their ethnicity. The presence of same-race and same-sex representation in the classroom, at minimum, would provide a vital support system (Warren et al., 2022) and offer students visible role models to emulate as they navigate their academic and personal development.

The absence of fathers can play a detrimental role in the development of males as they transition into manhood, as noted by Perales et al. (2023), because fathers model the

values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for social and economic success. This need is particularly evident for African American males. African American male teachers can serve as valuable assets by providing support and by influencing academic pathways, including increasing enrollment in gifted and advanced placement courses and reducing placement in special education. Currently, only 3.5% of African American students are enrolled in gifted or advanced placement courses, less than half the 7.6% enrollment rate of Caucasian students (Johnson & Larwin, 2020).

Several participants in this study reported that they had been accepted into gifted and advanced placement classrooms, and none were placed in special education. With more than 90% of teachers in the United States being White, and with African American students so severely underrepresented in gifted programs (Johnson & Larwin, 2020), the presence of more African American male teachers holds significant potential to shift these outcomes. The tangible presence of African American male educators in classrooms is essential, as it can foster the development of a positive academic, cultural, social, and ethnic identity among African American male students.

Theme 3. Internal Motivation, Future Orientation, and Resilience

This theme focused on participants' internal motivation, the challenges they faced, their personal growth, and their resilience in overcoming adversity. Participants also described a desire to help others, recognizing that the support they had received was instrumental to their own success. Their accounts detailed the trials they encountered and the ways they persevered, emphasizing that these difficult experiences ultimately

strengthened their determination to achieve rather than leaving them feeling victimized by circumstances (Bandura, 2024).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, parents instilled within their sons a strong desire to succeed (Wilder, 2020). Participants acknowledged these parental standards but also expressed a determination to exceed them. For some, graduating from high school was considered the “bare minimum,” as their aspirations extended far beyond this milestone. Their psychosocial development began with the adoption of parental goals, values, and expectations regarding academic achievement, which they gradually internalized and made their own (Kapetanovic & Skoog, 2020). This internal drive became especially evident when they faced discouragement, unfair treatment, or negative stereotypes. In such moments, they drew upon resilience, reframing these challenges as opportunities to prove themselves and dismantle deficit-based assumptions.

Parents established high school graduation as a nonnegotiable goal, and students accepted this challenge by dedicating themselves to the academic tasks required to achieve it. School administrators, teachers, and coaches then raised expectations by presenting college entrance as the next benchmark for success. In response, students set concrete goals: some focused on achieving high ACT scores, others prioritized scholarship eligibility, while others pursued military service as a pathway to higher education. Several participants expressed an unwavering intention to attend college after high school, while others aspired to entrepreneurship. Both aspirations were grounded in the combined guidance of parents and school personnel (Hines, Lemons, & Crews, 2011). Such forward-looking orientations directly challenge deficit-based narratives that portray

African American males as unmotivated, lazy, or destined for academic failure (Smith & Hope, 2020).

Overall, participants demonstrated a consistent pattern of internal motivation, personal growth, and resilience. Their ability to transform adversity into determination underscores their refusal to be defined by stereotypes and highlights their commitment to success despite systemic barriers.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by CRT and the antideficit achievement framework. Historically, research has reinforced deficit-based beliefs that African American males lack motivation or the desire to achieve academically (Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). Such stereotypes have persisted over time, creating a false sense of validity. These assumptions provided the rationale for this study, which sought to identify the factors that contributed to the academic success of 10 African American males who graduated from urban high schools.

CRT emphasizes counter-storytelling, which validates the lived experiences of marginalized groups as essential knowledge in education (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Through counter-storytelling, the participants in this study challenged stereotypes by sharing how they achieved success despite structural barriers and deficit narratives. CRT also raises concerns about systemic failures, such as the exclusion of African American students from gifted or advanced placement courses within public schools, which participants indirectly referenced when discussing their own placements and opportunities.

Deficit-based thinking assumes that minority families and communities inherently produce students incapable of academic success (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023). This approach directly resists this logic by highlighting the ways African American males succeed despite stereotypes. This framework emphasizes parental influence in shaping educational goals, positive peer and teacher interactions, and the role of programs and experiences in preparing students for postsecondary life (Williams, 2019). The participants in this study embodied this framework: they credited parents for setting uncompromising standards, peers and teachers for sustaining motivation, and their own determination for transforming challenges into resilience.

The results align closely with CRT. Across themes, participants' counter-stories documented how race shaped opportunity structures and daily school experiences (for example, exclusion from advanced opportunities, the need for representation, navigating biased interactions, and the salience of culturally responsive teaching). The emphasis of Theme 2 on representation and culturally responsive education directly reflects CRT's focus on institutional arrangements that reproduce or disrupt inequity. Participants' narratives of belonging when teachers affirmed their identities, and of isolation when representation was absent, illustrate how school contexts can either perpetuate or challenge racialized norms. Theme 3 further demonstrates the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling: students reframed deficit narratives by naming and resisting stereotypes, converting discriminatory encounters into sources of resolve. Overall, CRT is a strong fit for interpreting these findings because it explains both the structural conditions

participants described and the emancipatory potential of practices that affirm identity, voice, and high expectations.

The results also fit the anti-deficit achievement framework. Theme 1 shows strengths-based catalysts such as parental expectations, extended family engagement, and community norms, that positioned graduation as nonnegotiable and future oriented. Theme 2 identifies school-based assets, encouragement, mentorship, recognition, peer networks, and culturally responsive practices, that supplied actionable supports rather than pathologizing students. Theme 3 highlights internal assets, future orientation, agency, service to others, and resilience, that participants mobilized to meet high goals. Taken together, the themes exemplify the framework's core premise: understanding success by mapping assets across family, school, and individual domains instead of attributing outcomes to presumed deficiencies. The framework therefore provides a precise explanatory lens for why and how these students graduated and planned beyond high school.

Together, CRT and the antideficit achievement framework provided a lens through which the participants' achievements could be understood as both a refutation of deficit assumptions and an affirmation of their agency. These frameworks support the view that African American males are not exceptions to a deficit norm but experts on their own capacity to succeed, even when structures attempt to deny them that success.

Limitations of the Study

Various precautions were taken to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of this descriptive qualitative study. All interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform,

which was effective given that participants lived in different locations across the United States. One limitation of this study was the scheduling of Zoom interviews, as several sessions were either canceled or delayed due to time constraints. Many participants were recruited through snowball sampling. In some respects, this method was beneficial because participants entered the study without preconceived notions about providing answers that might please the researcher. However, the use of snowball sampling further constrained the range of perspectives, as participants were often connected through similar social networks, potentially narrowing the diversity of experiences represented in the data.

The study was limited by its small sample size of 10 participants, which, while providing rich and detailed narratives, restricts the transferability of findings to broader populations of African American males. Additionally, although participants were drawn from different urban areas within the United States, the study did not account for regional variations in school resources, policies, or community supports that may shape academic outcomes in distinct ways.

Another limitation of this study was the absence of in-person interviews. Although virtual conferencing allowed for the completion of interviews, it eliminated the opportunity to build rapport more fully and to observe nonverbal communication such as body language. These interactions might have contributed to a deeper analysis and interpretation of the data. A final limitation related to the use of Zoom was the challenge of navigating time zone differences. Careful attention to scheduling was required, as each participant volunteered their time to be part of the study.

Recommendations

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size to include a broader range of participants, which would increase the transferability of findings and allow for greater diversity of perspectives. Recruitment strategies beyond snowball sampling may help capture voices from varied social networks and contexts. Studies that focus on specific regions or compare multiple regions could also account for differences in school resources, policies, and community supports that shape academic outcomes in distinct ways. In-person interviews, where feasible, may strengthen rapport and provide additional insights through observation of nonverbal communication, while mixed-methods approaches could complement qualitative findings with quantitative data. Additionally, logistical challenges such as time zone differences might be mitigated in future research through flexible scheduling, the use of asynchronous interview tools, or regionally focused studies to reduce barriers to participation.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American males who successfully graduated from urban high schools. A recommendation that come from the results of this study include further research on the importance of African American male presence in schools, particularly in teaching and leadership roles. Many participants in this study noted the presence of African American female teachers, an abundance of Caucasian male and female teachers, and a few African American male coaches. However, only one African American male principal and one African American male teacher were identified in their schools. Jeter and Melendez (2022) documented that less than 2% of teachers in the K–12 system are

African American males, and African American men account for only 3% of faculty on college campuses across the United States. The vast majority of K–12 educators are Caucasian females from middle-class backgrounds, who often have limited experience working with African American children (Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). While this demographic reality is not inherently problematic, the inclusion of African American adult males in classrooms could provide critical support for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of younger African American male students (Johns, 2016).

Prior research has demonstrated that students achieve higher math and reading scores when taught by same-race educators. They also experience fewer disciplinary actions, are less likely to drop out of school, and have greater chances of attending college (Mee, Silverman, & Hartzell, 2024). The fact that the participants in this study achieved such notable academic success despite the absence of African American male teachers underscores the significance of this issue. Johns (2016) emphasized the value of students being able to see African American men in professional educational roles, particularly in settings where they are underrepresented.

Opposite-race teachers may unintentionally hold biases against African American students, resulting in lowered academic expectations and reduced tolerance for student behaviors (Heidelberg, Phelps, & Collins, 2022). Such biases can undermine academic growth and contribute to feelings of physical and emotional unsafety among students. Although participants in this study described feeling cared for by some members of their schools, the overall shortage of African American male educators highlights an ongoing gap. McKinney de Royston et al. (2021) demonstrated that diverse programs designed to

meet student needs can have tremendous impact, and Young and Young (2020) confirmed that African American male educators are equally capable of providing instructional, emotional, and social support. Just as African American female educators have historically provided “other-mothering” support, African American male educators can offer “other-fathering” roles that meet the unique needs of students (Lynch-Wilkerson, 2024). Future research should further examine these roles and the potential benefits of increasing African American male representation in schools.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several implications at the individual, family, organizational, and societal levels. At the individual level, the findings suggest that affirming students’ identities, recognizing their achievements, and cultivating future-oriented goal setting can enhance motivation and resilience for African American males in comparable urban high school contexts. By framing graduation as a nonnegotiable milestone and pairing that expectation with culturally responsive encouragement, schools can create conditions that strengthen academic self-concept and empower students to resist deficit-based narratives. These practices align with the voices of the participants, who described persistence not only as a personal goal but also as a refusal to conform to negative stereotypes.

At the family level, the results highlight the importance of structured school–family partnerships that elevate parental expectations and align them with clear academic pathways. Participants consistently described how their parents and extended families provided nonnegotiable standards, pride-based motivation, and accountability. Schools

that intentionally build on these dynamics, through collaborative communication, shared benchmarks, and opportunities for families to participate in recognition events, may reinforce the family-based supports that were central to these graduates' persistence. Such efforts acknowledge the critical role of parents and caregivers in transmitting values of determination, pride, and responsibility, while also bridging home and school expectations.

At the organizational and policy levels, the findings suggest that schools and broader systems can support African American male students through expanded mentorship opportunities, recognition mechanisms, peer academic networks, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Strategic recruitment and retention of African American male educators and leaders may strengthen representation, affirm student identity, and cultivate belonging. Policy efforts that expand equitable access to advanced coursework, provide funding for culturally relevant programs, and reduce financial barriers to postsecondary transitions, through scholarships, advising supports, and pipeline programs, directly align with the success conditions described by participants. These implications remain bounded to urban high school contexts similar to those represented in this study and should be extended beyond with caution until supported by additional evidence.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research that prioritizes African American male voices in education, aligning with the CRT emphasis on counter-storytelling. Theoretically, it affirms the value of the anti-deficit thinking in shifting the conversation from what African American males "lack" to

what enables them to succeed. Empirically, the study demonstrates that high expectations, peer and family support, and culturally responsive practices are consistent predictors of persistence and achievement.

For practice, educators and administrators are encouraged to strengthen mentorship programs, engage families as partners in academic success, and foster peer support networks. Professional development that challenges deficit-based thinking and promotes cultural responsiveness is particularly critical for teachers who may unknowingly perpetuate stereotypes.

In sum, the study underscores that the academic success of African American males is best understood as the product of intersecting supports: parental and community expectations, peer and educator mentorship, and personal resilience. These insights can inform practices and policies designed to reduce dropout rates, expand equitable opportunities, and promote positive social change without overstating the study's boundaries.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the troubling statistics surrounding African American males and high school completion. Far too often, deficit narratives portray them as valuing entertainment, athletics, crime, or irresponsibility over education, while overlooking their capacity to achieve beyond such stereotypes. For example, in 2018 African American males were six times more likely than Caucasian men to be incarcerated and in 2010 one in nine African American students had an incarcerated parent compared to one in 57 Caucasian students (Hammond et al., 2020). Such

disparities reflect systemic inequities rather than a lack of ability or aspiration. Indeed, participants in this study emphasized that families and communities placed strong value on education, countering the misconception that African American parents lack care or commitment (Grice, 2020). Parents, extended family members, and community figures consistently instilled the belief that a high school diploma was essential but not sufficient for success.

The findings further demonstrate that African American male students aspire to meet and exceed high academic expectations, resisting stereotypes that frame them as unwilling or incapable of achieving (Smith & Hope, 2020). Equal treatment in the classroom, anchored by high expectations and supportive relationships, fosters confidence and self-esteem (Comeaux et al., 2020). Given that the experiences of African American males in school often mirror their treatment in society (Wallace et al., 2022), creating secure and affirming learning environments becomes critical. Increasing same-race and same-sex representation through the presence of African American male educators can help dismantle stereotypes of criminality or disengagement, while fostering a culture that affirms the talents, resilience, and potential of these students (Moore & Phelps, 2021).

Ultimately, this study shows that African American males possess the same academic promise as their peers from other cultural groups. The 10 participants succeeded despite challenges such as the absence of role models, low institutional expectations, disciplinary inequities, limited exposure to culturally relevant curricula, and pervasive stereotypes. Their success underscores the potential of what Duncan (2022)

terms emancipatory pedagogy, which involves holding students to high expectations, implementing curricula that highlight African American contributions, and designing lessons that acknowledge racial oppression while building constructive responses.

Coupled with the motivation demonstrated by these participants, such approaches can reshape the educational trajectory of African American males. By fostering inclusive and rigorous learning environments, schools can increase graduation rates and, in turn, strengthen families, communities, and the public education system as a whole, contributing to a future that offers better outcomes for all students.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Demographic Questions

1. Age
2. Ethnicity
3. Gender
4. Have you graduated from high school? If so, what year?
5. What is your current occupation?
6. What are your parents' highest completed level of education?

Interview Questions

RQ1—How do African American males, who graduated from urban high schools, describe the factors that contributed to their academic success?

- As described in the flyer, this study focuses on the experiences of academically successful African American males who graduated from high school. Please tell me what actions, if any, have helped you to graduate from high school.

Probing questions:

1. Can you describe your personal motivation for completing high school?
2. What role did your family or community play in your decision to graduate?
 - a. Would you consider your parents as a source of motivation to graduate from high school?
 - b. Do you have other family members, or members of the community, who provided you with motivation to graduate?
3. How would you describe the overall environment of your high school?

4. Were there specific teachers or staff members who positively influenced your educational journey? If so, how?
5. Were these teachers of the same sex? Or opposite sex?
6. Have you ever experienced in-school disciplinary actions?
7. Were you ever placed in a special education course(s)? If so, what was the rationale behind the placement?
8. Were you ever enrolled into gifted, or advanced placement coursework? If so, what were the class(es)?
9. What is your most encouraging academic experience? What made that a memorable occasion?
10. What was your most discouraging academic experience? What made that a memorable occasion?
11. What kinds of support systems (e.g., mentoring, counseling, after-school programs) were available to you at your high school?
 - a. How effective were these support systems in helping you stay on track to graduate?
12. What were the main challenges you faced during high school, both inside and outside of school?
 - a. How did you overcome these challenges?
13. Were there any academic programs or extracurricular activities that played a significant role in your ability to graduate? Please explain.

14. Did you participate in any culturally relevant classes or programs? If so, how did these classes impact your schooling experience?
15. How did your peers influence your high school experience and your decision to graduate?
 - a. Were there any peer groups or friendships that provided support or motivation?
16. What does high school graduation mean to you personally and to your family?
17. How do you think your high school experience has shaped your current goals and aspirations?
18. Based on your experience, what changes or improvements would you suggest to better support African American male students in urban high schools?
 - a. Are there specific programs or resources you believe would help increase graduation rates among African American males?
19. How do you relate your identity as an African American male to your high school experience?
 - a. Were there any specific instances where you felt your identity impacted on your interactions with teachers, staff, or peers?
20. How has graduating from high school influenced your future plans or career aspirations?
21. What advice would you give to current African American male students in urban high schools who are striving to graduate?
22. Is there anything else you would like to add?