

1-8-2026

## School Social Workers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the Strategies used to Reduce the Dropout Rates of African American High School Male Students

TaWanda McLaurin  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

TaWanda McLaurin

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

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2025

Abstract

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by

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MA, Walden University, 2013

BA, Fayetteville State University, 1993

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2026

## Abstract

The problem investigated in this study was that approximately 34% of African American male students had dropped out of high school in an urban public school district in the Northern United States. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies used to reduce dropout rates among African American male high school students. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 10 school social workers from one urban public school district who worked with African American male students at risk of dropping out. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: (1) relational and school-based supports improved student engagement and persistence; (2) family and community support positively influenced motivation and retention; (3) culturally relevant practices enhanced trust and engagement; (4) advocacy was essential for securing equitable access to supports; and (5) systemic barriers, including limited resources, high caseloads, and restrictive policies, hindered retention efforts. The findings suggest that coordinated, relationship-centered, culturally responsive, and advocacy-informed approaches may reduce dropout rates and improve engagement and academic persistence among African American male high school students. This study contributes to positive social change by informing school leaders and practitioners about equitable, culturally responsive supports that promote retention and academic success for African American male high school students.

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## Dedication

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, I give all honor and glory. Thank You for Your grace, strength, wisdom, and faithfulness throughout this journey. When the process felt overwhelming, You renewed my spirit, sustained my mind, and reminded me that this work had purpose beyond the pages. Without You, this accomplishment would not have been possible.

To my husband, Gary Bernard McLaurin, thank you for your constant encouragement, especially during moments when I felt overwhelmed and wanted to give up. Your words, patience, and steady support strengthened my resolve and helped me press forward.

To my sons, J'Nard and Michael McLaurin, thank you for being my inspiration, drive, and motivation. Your love, pride, and encouragement fueled my determination to complete this journey. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

## Acknowledgments

The dissertation journey required significant dedication, perseverance, and time. I am deeply grateful to my family for their love, patience, and understanding as I devoted countless hours to completing this work. Your support made this accomplishment possible.

I extend my sincere appreciation to my dissertation chair, Dr. Denette Brown, and my co-chair, Dr. John Johnson for their guidance, expertise, and thoughtful feedback throughout this process. Dr. Brown, thank you for your encouragement, accountability, and timely push when it was needed most. You challenged me to grow, think critically, and strive for excellence. Through your mentorship, I have developed confidence as a scholar and emerged as a researcher.

I also wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Peter P. Kiriakidis for his guidance and support throughout the dissertation process. His encouragement, clarity, and reassurance helped me remain focused and persistent during challenging moments. His wisdom and belief in my ability to complete this work were invaluable, and I am deeply appreciative of the role he played in helping me stay motivated and press forward.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

There has been an increase in minority high school students' dropout rates over the past 2 decades, which was recorded at 10.9% in 2022 (Piscitello et al., 2022). Male students' inability to complete high school studies has risen globally, and the United States has not been exempted from this trend. Several factors have been linked to this pattern, such as defiant attitudes, irresponsibility, drug use, and family or school-related challenges (Johansson, 2019). Minority males who drop out of school are also at increased risk of socio-emotional problems that could lead to delinquent or criminal behavior. Beyond individual consequences, school dropout results in broader societal costs, including reduced national income, increased demand for social services, and higher crime rates (Leban & Masterson, 2022).

The problem that I investigated in this study was that 34% of African American male students had dropped out of high school in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. Potential implications for positive social change included new ways in which school social workers and their leadership practices could retain African American high school male students. In this chapter, I present the background, the problem, and the study's purpose, the nature of the study, the conceptual framework, and the research question. I also discuss the definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitation, limitations, significance, and summary.

## **Background**

A review of the literature revealed that African American high school male students had been dropping out of school at disproportionately high rates. Researchers have identified both strengths and areas for improvement in schools seeking to reduce dropout rates, emphasizing that effective strategies must address a wide range of characteristics, including demographics, climate, policies, disciplinary procedures, leadership philosophies, staff beliefs, and student attitudes and behaviors (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). Dropping out of school is not an impulsive action but rather a cumulative process shaped by negative school experiences such as academic failure, grade retention, absenteeism, disciplinary problems, and repeated transfers that gradually alienate students from school (Leban & Masterson, 2022). Studies have also shown that exclusionary practices such as suspension contribute to higher dropout rates among African American students compared to their peers, highlighting the need for additional research on how disciplinary practices specifically affect African American males (Gatson & Enslin, 2021). Kearney et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of implementing adequate measures to keep students engaged in school. Unlike providers in other child-serving systems, school personnel are uniquely responsible for promoting learning and intellectual development, and this responsibility often requires coordinated service plans across multiple systems. Some students with challenges in one domain also need support from other youth-serving agencies, making it critical to understand the organizational policies, structures, and conditions unique to each system (Best & Blakeslee, 2019). Awareness of these factors informs how schools and partner agencies

can work together to facilitate positive educational outcomes and supports the development of targeted strategies that empower at-risk youth toward academic success.

School social workers play an important role in promoting the overall well-being and academic success of students as they serve as links between the school, students, families, and the community, providing essential support and resources (Bates & Zhang, 2024; Huxtable, 2022). Their primary focus is to address and alleviate social, emotional, and behavioral challenges such as mental health concerns, family problems, bullying, or trauma. They also collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other professionals to develop and implement interventions, support plans, and individualized strategies, while advocating for students' rights and access to services, making referrals, and coordinating with external agencies when needed. By fostering safe, inclusive, and supportive environments, school social workers promote students' resilience, social-emotional growth, and educational achievement (Lovett, 2021). Through their dedicated support, they create the foundation for students to thrive both personally and academically.

School social workers assist with removing barriers that students face by offering resources, making referrals, and ensuring access to critical services that support both academic achievement and personal well-being (Tan et al., 2020). Beyond connecting students to resources, they provide direct and individualized support, tailoring interventions to address unique needs and circumstances. This personalized approach not only helps students overcome challenges but also underscores the importance of continued research into effective ways of assessing and responding to diverse student needs. In their work with high school minority dropouts, social workers play a

particularly vital role by offering guidance, advocacy, and encouragement. They work closely with students and families to uncover underlying reasons for disengagement, which often include systemic barriers, cultural factors, or personal struggles (Murray et al., 2024). Through counseling, mentorship, and goal setting, social workers help students navigate complex educational pathways and reengage with school. Collaboration with community organizations further expands the scope of support by connecting students to job training, vocational programs, and alternative educational opportunities (Leban & Masterson, 2022). These partnerships provide students with practical tools to build both academic and career readiness. Ultimately, by addressing systemic barriers while also responding to individual needs, school social workers empower students to pursue brighter futures and position them for long-term educational success.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem investigated in this study was that approximately 34% of African American male students had dropped out of high school in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States. The local public school district consisted of approximately 90 schools and served more than 49,000 students. The student population comprised 48% African American, 29% Caucasian, 13% Hispanic, and 10% other racial or ethnic groups. Approximately 60% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged. Around 100 school social workers provided comprehensive services to students, ensuring compliance with educational and professional standards while meeting student needs. According to the district deputy superintendent, the school social worker-to-student ratio was 1:250, and the teacher-to-student ratio was lower than the state

average, at 1:14. According to the district superintendent, on average, more than 470 African American students dropped out each academic year.

According to the district associate superintendent, school social workers reported to district administrators that the number of African American students dropping out of school had increased over the past five academic years. Teachers also reported to district administrators that the graduation rates of African American students had decreased over the same period and recommended interventions to help these students graduate.

According to the District Parents' Association representative, parents of African American students expressed to district administrators their desire to support their children in staying in school. Community leaders shared concerns with district administrators that many African American students were dropping out of high school. This collective feedback underscored the need for targeted interventions and support systems to improve graduation rates and better support African American students.

A review of the literature has revealed the need to conduct research on how to support diverse students' needs to stay in school. Rajasekaran and Reyes (2019) studied students' decisions to drop out of school and suggested examining the role of school disengagement on the dropout rates of high school students. Additionally, Kearney et al. (2023) examined school attendance and graduation rates of diverse students and recommended interventions, such as interactions with school staff members, to help diverse students graduate from school. According to Van Den Berghe et al. (2022), further research was needed on the support of diverse students required to stay in school.

School social workers play an essential role in the education system, often serving as the first point of contact for students at-risk of dropping out. Recent research has highlighted the rising dropout rates among high school students, particularly minority males, and underscored the need for proactive strategies to address this challenge (Matschke et al., 2023). Interventions designed to support diverse students, such as mentoring, counseling, and targeted academic assistance, have been identified as effective in helping more students successfully graduate (Kearney et al., 2023; Rodgers, 2023). Within this context, school social workers not only provide immediate support but also act as advocates who help shape long-term solutions to reduce dropout rates and promote equity.

A review of the literature has also revealed the need to conduct research on understanding students individually and culturally. Murray et al. (2024) revealed that academic remediation could help African American students with academic success and recommended further research on the academic success of these students. Hensley (2022) examined the perceptions of African American high school students and reported that meaningful experiences were important in building relationships between students and teachers. Thus, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the dropout rates of minority high school students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. I used a qualitative method to explore

complex phenomena in-depth and gain a rich understanding of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and contexts (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Qualitative studies offer flexibility in terms of research design, data collection, and analysis, and prioritize the voices and perspectives of the participants (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

### **Research Question**

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What were school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American males in a high school in an urban local school district in the Northern United States?

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is used to explain the interaction between individuals and their environments. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the nested systems that shape development, ranging from immediate and direct influences to broader societal and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Crawford, 2020). These systems are organized into five interconnected levels—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem that together illustrate how individual development is embedded within overlapping social and cultural structures (Tudge & Payir, 2021). The microsystem represents the immediate environments in which individuals directly interact, such as family, school, peer groups, and close relationships. This level of the ecological model has a direct and immediate impact on an individual's development, as it is where they experience daily interactions, socialization, and support. The mesosystem, on the other hand, focuses on the connections and interactions between different microsystems and examines how the

various settings in an individual's life, such as family and school, influence each other. For instance, a child's experiences at home could impact their behavior and performance at school. The mesosystem emphasizes the importance of understanding how these interconnected systems shape an individual's development. The mesosystem, which highlights the interconnections between various systems, is crucial in shaping an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This perspective emphasizes the significance of comprehending how these interconnected systems, such as schools, families, and communities, interact and influence an individual's experiences and outcomes (Tudge & Payir, 2021). By examining the mesosystem, researchers gain insights into how these systems work together and impact an individual's development and well-being (Coll et al., 1996). Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective interventions and support systems that positively impact individuals within these interconnected systems (Rosa & Tudge, 2020). By recognizing these interactions, practitioners can tailor their approaches to address unique needs within each layer of influence.

The microsystem represents the immediate environments in which individuals directly interact, such as family, school, peer groups, and close relationships. This level of the ecological model has a direct and immediate impact on an individual's development, as it is where they experience daily interactions, socialization, and support. The mesosystem, on the other hand, focuses on the connections and interactions between different microsystems and examines how the various settings in an individual's life, such as family and school, influence each other. For instance, a child's experiences at home

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The chronosystem recognizes the importance of time and temporal factors in understanding human development. It highlights the changes and transitions individuals experience across their lives, including personal milestones, historical events, and sociohistorical conditions (Tudge & Payir, 2021). This perspective emphasizes that development is dynamic rather than static, unfolding within an ever-changing context. The macrosystem, in contrast, serves as the broader framework within which the other systems operate, shaping an individual's development through cultural, societal, and historical influences. It provides the contextual backdrop that guides the values, norms, and beliefs influencing behavior and opportunity (Khairul et al., 2023). Together, the

macrosystem and chronosystem underscore how both broad cultural contexts and the passage of time influence individual development and the functioning of interconnected systems.

By considering the macrosystem and the chronosystem, researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of how broader cultural and historical contexts, as well as temporal factors, shape individuals' development within the interconnected systems of the ecological model (Khairul et al., 2023). This perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis of the complex interactions between individuals and their environments, enabling the design of interventions and policies that effectively support positive development and holistic well-being.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory holds that all these systems interact with each other and influence an individual's development. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the multiple contexts in which individuals live and grow, highlighting the reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environments (Guy-Evans, 2020). The theory also provides a holistic and multidimensional perspective for understanding how individuals develop and how their environments influence them. Researchers and practitioners apply this framework to study and address issues related to child development, family dynamics, educational systems, community development, and more.

Bronfenbrenner's five interconnected systems, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, are used in this study. These five interconnected systems are relevant because the focus is on exploring school social

workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. School social workers monitor students' progress. The logical connection between this theory and the study is that this framework is used to develop the interview protocol containing the interview questions (Appendix A). The components of this framework are used to understand the responses from school social workers who are interviewed concerning the dropout rates of African American high school male students. The interview data are organized to include the five interconnected systems of this framework to answer the research question.

### **Nature of Study**

The phenomenon of this qualitative study was that 34% of African American male students had dropped out of high school in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States. This study explored school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. A qualitative method was used to conduct this study. Qualitative research is recognized as a rigorous approach for examining complex social problems and is particularly valuable for exploring multi-layered human experiences (Denzin et al., 2023). Such methods are well-suited for research questions requiring detailed and contextualized analysis (Aspers & Corte, 2019). For this reason, a basic qualitative design was selected to explore participants' perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semistructured interviews provided the opportunity to capture the views of school social workers in their own words (Patton, 2015), and open-ended questions were used to

directly address the research problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2023). This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences.

Qualitative data were collected from school social workers from an urban public school district located in the Northern United States to answer the research question. The interviews were semistructured, confidential Zoom interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour and were audio-recorded. Ten school social workers were interviewed. The selection criteria required participants to be employed as school social workers with experience working with African American male high school dropouts. A qualitative research design was appropriate for this study to explore the perceptions of school social workers regarding the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students.

Ethnography, phenomenology, and case study designs were considered but ultimately were not selected. Ethnography is a qualitative research design that emphasizes the study of cultural phenomena and seeks to understand the behaviors, interactions, and perceptions of a group in its natural setting (Ploder & Hamann, 2021). This approach is particularly valuable when researchers aim to develop a deep, contextual understanding of a group over an extended period, often through immersion in the participants' environment. While ethnography produces rich cultural descriptions and insights into social interactions, it was not selected for this study because the focus was not on cultural practices over time but rather on exploring the perceptions of school social workers regarding dropout prevention strategies. In qualitative research, phenomenology focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Belgrave & Seide, 2019).

Studies that do not focus on individual life experiences often employ other designs, such as case studies, grounded theory, or ethnography, where the emphasis is on processes, systems, or group dynamics rather than individual perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to capture and describe how individuals experience a phenomenon to reveal its essence. It is particularly suited for studies that focus on lived experiences, and the meanings people attach to them (Belgrave & Seide, 2019). While phenomenology produces rich insights into personal perspectives, it was not chosen for this study because the focus was not on the individual life experiences of participants but rather on school social workers' perceptions of strategies for preventing dropout among African American male students. For studies that do not focus on individual narratives, other designs such as case study, grounded theory, or ethnography are often more appropriate, since they emphasize systems, processes, or group interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this research, a basic qualitative design provided the flexibility needed to explore professional perspectives without the extended focus required by phenomenological inquiry.

For this study, the focus was on school social workers' perceptions of dropout prevention strategies. A case study design is commonly used to explore group behaviors or cultural practices and is particularly suited for holistic, in-depth investigations (Campbell et al., 2020). This research design often relies on triangulation. However, a case study design was not selected for this study because the focus was not on examining group behaviors or cultural practices.

Purposive sampling is a nonprobability technique (Campbell et al., 2020). This method is particularly useful for gathering in-depth information from individuals who can provide unique perspectives and insights into the research topic. Purposive sampling allows for the deliberate selection of participants who are especially knowledgeable or experienced in the phenomenon under study (Campbell et al., 2020). Moreover, purposive sampling is especially effective when working with small, focused samples in qualitative studies. In this context, depth and detail are prioritized over generalizability, making it an appropriate strategy for this study.

Purposive sampling was used to select 10 school social workers from one urban public school district who had experience working with African American male high school dropouts. The overall population included approximately 100 school social workers. In qualitative research, sample sizes of around six participants are often sufficient, depending on the study's purpose and the point of data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Rather than aiming for broad generalizability, qualitative studies emphasize the richness and depth of the data collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Smaller samples, therefore, make it possible to explore participants' experiences in greater detail, allowing for deeper insights into the phenomenon being studied. In this study, that approach ensured that participants' insights were analyzed with enough depth to reach data saturation, which in turn supported the identification and refinement of five central themes addressing strategies used to reduce dropout rates among African American male high school students.

The sample size plays a role in achieving data saturation, which occurs when no new information or themes emerge from interviews or other forms of data collection, signaling that additional data is unnecessary (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, the sample consisted of 10 school social workers who met the selection criteria. Birt et al. (2016) emphasized that reaching saturation is a critical marker in qualitative research because it demonstrates that the study has sufficiently examined the phenomenon under investigation. Sufficient qualitative data were collected through semistructured one-on-one interviews and analyzed until no new themes emerged, indicating that saturation had been reached.

### **Definitions**

*School Leadership:* A method of influence that resulted in the accomplishment of desired goals. Leadership entailed motivating and assisting others in achieving a vision for the school that was founded on distinct personal and professional values (Bates & Zhang, 2024).

*School Social Worker:* A state-certified professional employed at the study site for a minimum of three years in the Northern United States. To support and encourage children's academic and social success, school social workers served as a bridge between the home, school, and community by offering both direct and indirect services to students, families, and school staff (Tan et al., 2020).

### **Assumptions**

Leedy and Ormrod (2023) explained that assumptions were so fundamental that the research problem would not have been possible without them. Assumptions are

necessary to conduct a study based on design and methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this basic qualitative study, it was assumed that participants answered the interview questions honestly and were comfortable discussing their perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American male high school students. Additionally, it was assumed that the participants were state-certified and had worked with African American male high school dropouts.

### **Scope**

The scope of this basic qualitative study was African American male high school students. The scope included current, state-certified school social workers. The emphasis was on exploring the experienced professional perspectives of these practitioners within one urban district context.

### **Delimitations**

One delimitation was only school social workers who were state-certified and actively employed in the district. Retired social workers were excluded, as were social workers without direct experience with African American male high school dropouts. Another delimitation was the geographic boundary: the study was limited to one urban public school district in the Northern United States. These decisions reduced the breadth of the study but ensured in depth.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation was the size of the sample, which consisted of 10 school social workers from one urban district. In addition, scheduling interviews was sometimes difficult due to the demanding nature of participants' jobs. The study also focused

exclusively on school social workers, excluding the perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators. As a result, some important viewpoints may not have been captured. Another limitation was that all interviews were conducted by a single individual, which introduced the possibility of bias influencing the process. To minimize this risk, a semistructured interview protocol was used, and consistent procedures were applied across all interviews.

Future research should expand the participant pool beyond school social workers to include students, teachers, administrators, and families to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing African American male students' academic engagement and persistence. Incorporating focus groups or classroom observations would allow for triangulation and strengthen the validity of findings. Additionally, including participants from diverse geographic and demographic contexts could enhance transferability. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasized, acknowledging and addressing limitations in future research is essential for building credibility and advancing the knowledge base in qualitative inquiry.

### **Significance**

The results hold significance for school social workers. More broadly, the study may inform the fields of social work and education by offering insight into effective practices for retaining African American males in high schools (Johnson, 2023). District administrators can apply these findings to strengthen policies and support aimed at reducing dropout rates. Prior research highlights that systemic and relationship-based interventions are essential for addressing the structural inequities that contribute to

dropout among African American male students (Harper & Smith, 2023). Finally, the study contributes to positive social change by suggesting new ways in which school social workers and their leadership practices can promote the retention of African American high school male students.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. In Chapter 1, the problem is outlined, noting that 34% of African American male students have dropped out of high school in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States. The chapter also introduces the purpose of the study and the conceptual framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of various systems influencing individual development. In addition, the nature of the study, its limitations, and assumptions are discussed. Chapter 2 builds on this foundation by presenting a review of the literature related to reducing dropout rates among African American male high school students.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The problem investigated in this study is that 34% of African American male students have dropped out of high school in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. The findings may also contribute to positive social change by identifying new ways in which school social workers and their leadership practices can retain African American high school male students.

Many African American male students continue to leave high school before graduation, especially in urban school districts. Prior studies emphasized the importance of support mechanisms in fostering student retention and empowering African American male students to overcome barriers to success (Milner, 2019; Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021). Researchers have examined the academic trajectories of African American high school males, stressing the need to value students' cultural backgrounds and identities to create inclusive environments where they feel respected and motivated to succeed (Gwathney, 2021).

Educators play a critical role in supporting the retention of African American students by fostering motivation, achievement, and school engagement while creating learning environments that are inclusive and responsive. When students feel connected to their teachers and schools, they are more likely to persist through challenges rather than

disengage. Academic performance and student engagement are central to this process, as both strongly influence whether students remain enrolled or consider leaving school early (Piscitello et al., 2022; Virtanen et al., 2021). Beyond individual factors, systemic challenges such as inequitable school conditions in predominantly African American communities also contribute to higher dropout rates (Matschke et al., 2023; Warren, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires intentional interventions that not only strengthen engagement but also provide targeted supports to meet students' academic and social needs (Greenland & Moore, 2022). As discussed further in Chapter 2, these dynamics underscore the complexity of dropout prevention and highlight the essential role of school social workers in creating pathways to retention for African American male high school students.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Sage Premier and the Educational Research Information Center were used to search for peer-reviewed articles published within the last 5 years. The PsycINFO, SocINDEX, and EBSCOhost databases were also searched. Taylor and Francis Online and ProQuest Central were used. Education Source and Education Resource Starter were databases searched specifically for education-related literature. Google Scholar was used to conduct additional research. The Northeastern School District and the Department of Public Instruction also provided data and figures for the literature evaluation. The search key terms included *school social workers*, *urban public school districts*, *supporting African American high school male students*, and *how school social workers retain African American high school male students*.

## Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes that development is shaped by multiple layers of influence within both immediate and broader environments, while individuals also contribute to shaping those environments through their interactions. This perspective has been widely adopted by researchers, educators, and policymakers as a holistic way of examining how individuals and their surroundings interact (Agostinelli et al., 2019; Crawford, 2020). Rather than viewing development as the result of a single factor, the theory underscores the complex interplay of systems that affect human behavior and growth (Overton et al., 2006). Within the educational setting, Bronfenbrenner's model frames child development as an intricate network of relationships shaped by family, school, peers, and community, with each level interacting to either support or hinder success (Khairul et al., 2023). This framework was particularly useful for the present study because it allowed exploration of how African American male students' educational outcomes are influenced not only by schools but also by families, communities, and broader societal systems. Bronfenbrenner identified five interconnected systems that influence development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Among these, the microsystem, which includes the family, school, and peer group, is often considered the most influential in shaping children's experiences. This theoretical perspective has important implications for educational practices, as it underscores the ways in which multiple systems work together to affect student outcomes.

**Microsystem**

The microsystem represents the immediate environments where individuals interact daily, such as family, school, peers, and community. For African American male students, retention in high school is closely tied to the quality of interactions and support within these settings (Zorbaz & Özer, 2020). These dynamics can be used to explain the reasons behind high dropout rates and point to opportunities for intervention. Taylor et al. (2019) found that well-designed supports at the microsystem level can foster positive social change and increase graduation rates. The microsystem is also the stage where culture becomes deeply embedded in a child's life, as reciprocal relationships strongly shape experiences. Although the microsystem is influential at the immediate level, these interactions are still affected by broader systems.

**Mesosystem**

The mesosystem refers to the connections and interactions between different microsystems in an individual's life, such as the relationships between family and school, peers and community, or school and community organizations (Agostinelli et al., 2019). At this level, parental involvement plays an important role, as active engagement in parent-teacher conferences, school activities, and academic monitoring strengthens the support available to students (Schmid & Garrels, 2021). Positive family-school relationships can increase motivation and improve the likelihood of academic success, especially for African American male students at-risk of dropping out (Huguley et al., 2021). The quality of these interconnections significantly shapes educational experiences and influences students' long-term choices.

**Exosystem**

The exosystem encompasses community resources, government programs, workplace policies, and access to health and social services, all of which indirectly influence students' educational outcomes. Supportive workplace policies, such as flexible scheduling, allow parents to participate more actively in their child's schooling. Community organizations and media can also shape positive perceptions of education and foster inclusive environments that value diversity (Banaji et al., 2021). In addition, practical supports like reliable transportation and mentorship programs provide students with both access and encouragement, helping them remain engaged in school (Bryan & Henry, 2020). The exosystem refers to settings that indirectly shape an individual's development, even when they are not directly involved in those environments. For African American male high school dropouts, this level includes factors such as community resources, neighborhood conditions, and local institutions. These external influences determine the opportunities available to students (Beck & Hämäläinen, 2022; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). Ultimately, the strength or weakness of these external systems can either reinforce barriers or open doors for students, directly affecting their chances of persistence and success in school.

**Macrosystem**

The macrosystem refers to the broader cultural, social, economic, and political contexts that shape an individual's development. This level includes cultural norms, societal values, institutional racism, and educational policies that influence students' opportunities and outcomes. Within this context, parental and community involvement

plays a critical role in building strong support networks, particularly when mentorship and leadership programs connect students with positive role models (Lindsey et al., 2021). Civic engagement and social support initiatives can empower students by addressing challenges such as mental health and fostering inclusive environments (Banaji et al., 2021). Understanding the interplay of these ecological components was essential when examining the complex factors contributing to high school dropout rates among African American males.

### **Chronosystem**

By considering the dynamic and evolving nature of the chronosystem, educators, policymakers, and community leaders can design interventions that adapt to students' changing needs and promote both academic success and well-being (Tudge & Payir, 2021). Within this context, school social workers play a vital role in supporting students' academic and social-emotional development. The work of school social workers includes fostering trust and respect, promoting culturally responsive practices, and strengthening communication between families and schools (Lindsey et al., 2021). In addition, school social workers help ensure stability during times of transition by addressing challenges such as family disruptions, community change, or shifting educational expectations. School social workers are also instrumental in implementing trauma-informed practices by training teachers and staff, supporting students who have experienced trauma, and cultivating a school-wide culture of safety and care (Agostinelli et al., 2019). These combined efforts of school social workers allow schools to remain responsive over time,

creating an environment where African American male students can adapt, grow, and ultimately thrive despite systemic challenges.

### **Transformational Leadership and Student Support**

The conceptual framework was a central element of this study because it provided theoretical foundation for interpreting and analyzing the phenomenon under investigation. Conceptual frameworks have been widely applied in research to guide investigations and extend the existing knowledge base. Within this study, the framework emphasized how cultivating openness, trust, and strong communication fosters a sense of belonging and commitment. Transformational leadership highlights the role of vision, empathy, and inspiration in motivating individuals to perform at their highest potential and positively shaping organizational outcomes (Guy-Evans, 2020). Prioritizing employee well-being and professional development has been shown to increase engagement and job satisfaction. Fostering a culture of innovation and creativity further strengthens organizational success by encouraging experimentation, viewing failure as an opportunity for growth, and supporting novel ideas. In addition, promoting organizational citizenship behaviors, including collaboration, cooperation, and exceeding formal job requirements, enhances teamwork and cohesion in the workplace. Recognizing and rewarding these behaviors helps cultivate a culture of mutual support and sustained collaboration (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Social and emotional support is particularly important for African American male students given the challenges they often face related to systemic inequalities, racial discrimination, and socioeconomic

disadvantage. These factors contribute to social and emotional difficulties that are not always shared by their peers.

### **School Social Workers' Role in Supporting Emotional Well-Being**

School social workers, through their training in counseling and mental health, play a vital role in addressing these challenges by offering targeted interventions. They provide safe environments where students can process emotions, work through trauma, and develop coping strategies for adverse situations, both in individual and group settings (Hensley, 2022). Mentoring programs implemented by school social workers provide African American male students with guidance and positive role models to help them navigate both personal and academic challenges. By addressing social and emotional barriers, these professionals support students in developing resilience, cultivating healthy coping strategies, and achieving academic success. Their efforts create supportive environments that enable students to overcome obstacles and foster stronger communities where young people are empowered to reach their full potential (Johnson, 2023). Brown and Davis (2022) developed a conceptual framework to examine how adolescents' engagement with social media affects mental well-being. Drawing on social cognitive theory and the biopsychosocial model of health, they highlighted the interaction of personal characteristics, social influences, and biological processes. Social cognitive theory explains how individuals acquire knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors by observing and modeling others. Social cognitive theory also highlights how exposure to information on social media platforms can shape adolescents' mental health perceptions and behaviors. Banaji et al. (2021) explained that human behavior is influenced by the

interaction of personal factors (such as cognitive, emotional, and biological processes), behavioral patterns, and environmental conditions. These elements function through a process of triadic reciprocal causation, where each factor influences and is influenced by the others.

### **The Biopsychosocial Model and Its Application in Research**

The biopsychosocial model of health recognizes the interaction between biological, psychological, and social components influencing health outcomes. Brown and Davis (2022) utilize the biopsychosocial model to investigate the impact of social media usage, screen time, content consumption, and online social interactions on mental health outcomes in adolescents, considering individual vulnerabilities and social circumstances. These studies demonstrate the ongoing relevance and applicability of conceptual frameworks in various disciplines, assisting researchers in structuring their investigations, identifying significant variables, building linkages between distinct concepts, and developing targeted interventions that effectively address complex phenomena and promote positive outcomes.

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

#### **School Experiences of African American Male Students**

Sunbal and Jabeen (2021) underscored the importance of psychological wellbeing, family involvement, peer relationships, teacher-student interactions, disciplinary practices, and academic identity. Their findings on the school experiences of African American male students offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of their educational journey and highlighted the importance of holistic support mechanisms

in fostering success and retention. Moreover, creating culturally responsive learning environments and providing mentorship programs tailored to students' needs enhance their academic engagement and sense of belonging. Additionally, initiatives aimed at addressing inequalities in education, such as equitable resource allocation and inclusive curriculum development, are essential to ensuring equitable outcomes for African American male students (Clark-Louque & Latunde, 2019; Stein et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Milner (2019) suggested that fostering a culture of high expectations and empowerment, coupled with personalized academic and socio-emotional support, could empower African American male students to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential.

Murray et al. (2024) examined contextual influences on academic success, highlighting how factors such as peer commitment, school involvement, teacher expectations, and time spent on homework interact to shape the academic trajectories of African American male high school students. Implementing comprehensive academic remediation strategies addressed academic challenges and promoted positive outcomes for these students, fostering a supportive learning environment that catered to their diverse needs. Moreover, Villarreal Sosa and Martin (2021) highlighted the importance of training for educators, including social workers, to effectively support diverse student populations and address barriers to providing effective training. By equipping educators with culturally responsive pedagogical approaches, schools enhance their capacity to meet the needs of African American male students and facilitate their academic success

and well-being. This commitment to culturally responsive education paves the way for more equitable outcomes and a supportive learning environment for all students.

Strong student-teacher relationships play a central role in the educational experiences of African American male high school students. When nurtured, these connections foster trust, build a sense of belonging, and strengthen academic engagement and achievement. Personalized and culturally responsive approaches to teaching affirm students' cultural identities and create learning environments where diverse backgrounds are valued (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Parker et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, persistent racial disproportionalities in school discipline reveal that African American male students continue to face harsher consequences than their peers, which can limit their opportunities for success (Morris & Perry, 2016). To address these inequities, schools must move toward restorative practices and equitable policies that emphasize fairness and consider individual circumstances, rather than relying on punitive measures (Gregory et al., 2021). By integrating these approaches, educators can help foster inclusive, culturally affirming environments where African American male students feel valued and empowered to thrive both academically and personally. Jackson et al. (2021) emphasized the positive association between math academic identity and outcomes among African American males, suggesting the need for further exploration of this relationship. Understanding the role of academic identity informed interventions aimed at bolstering students' confidence and motivation in subjects, thereby enhancing their academic performance and persistence in school (Long & Wilburn, 2025). Furthermore, Gatson and Enslin (2021) underscored the importance of support systems in mitigating attrition

among African American male students. By providing comprehensive support networks encompassing academic, socio-emotional, and community resources, schools empowered these students to overcome challenges and achieve their educational goals. This holistic approach ensured that students had the foundation and encouragement needed to reach their full potential.

### **African American Male Students Psychological Needs**

Building upon Butts' (2022) work, which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling psychological needs to prevent student disengagement, addressing the socioemotional well-being of African American male students is critical to their academic achievement. A sense of belonging, autonomy, and competence directly shapes students' motivation and academic outcomes, while supportive and inclusive environments strengthen engagement and foster positive educational experiences (Killen & Rutland, 2022; Parker et al., 2021). In addition, psychological factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, and emotional regulation play a central role in sustaining students' success. When schools implement interventions that enhance socioemotional skills and provide mental health support, they not only improve academic performance but also contribute to overall well-being (Robinson & Nichols, 2024). Together, these efforts help create nurturing environments where African American male students can flourish both academically and personally.

### **Family Engagement**

Parental involvement can take many forms, including monitoring academic progress, providing educational resources, and advocating for students' needs within the

school system (Bryan & Henry, 2020). Strong family and community networks also contribute social and emotional support, academic guidance, and positive role modeling, all of which are critical for African American male students (Huguley et al., 2021).

Building collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and communities creates a supportive network that empowers students to succeed both academically and personally.

These partnerships establish a foundation of trust and collective strength, helping students reach their fullest potential in all areas of life (Freeman & McDonald, 2021).

Family and community involvement are essential components of efforts to retain African American male students in high school. Active family participation strengthens home-school connections, while community partnerships provide additional resources and support that reinforce students' success. School social workers also play a key role in fostering these collaborations by encouraging parents and guardians to take an active role in their child's education and by bridging communication between home and school.

Joyce Epstein's conceptual framework of six types of involvement provides a systematic approach to understanding and enhancing parental and community engagement in education (Epstein, 2019). Each form of engagement plays a unique role in strengthening students' academic achievement and overall well-being. Research on family-school partnerships further emphasizes that engagement is multifaceted and must account for the diverse roles families and communities play in supporting students (Bryan & Henry, 2020). When schools acknowledge these varied contributions and foster collaboration, they create supportive environments that enhance student performance and well-being (Freeman & McDonald, 2021). This discussion is particularly relevant to

African American male students, as strong family and community partnerships can serve as protective factors against systemic barriers and help improve retention rates.

Parenting is recognized as the first fundamental form of engagement within Epstein's framework, focusing on the role of parents in fostering their children's education and development at home (Epstein, 2019). This includes creating supportive home environments, setting high academic expectations, and maintaining routines that encourage study and learning. Research has shown that when families create structured, nurturing environments, students are more likely to experience academic success and resilience (Taylor et al., 2019). Strong family-school partnerships are also enhanced when schools provide clear communication channels that invite parents to participate in their child's education and remain informed about academic progress (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021). Volunteering involves the active participation of parents in school activities and events, demonstrating their investment in their children's education (Willis et al., 2021). This includes assisting in classrooms, supporting school events, accompanying students on field trips, and contributing through parent-teacher organizations. Such involvement not only benefits students directly but also strengthens the broader school community. Beyond volunteering, parents contribute meaningfully to decision-making by serving on school committees and advisory groups and by collaborating with educators and administrators to shape school policies and practices (Clark-Louque & Latunde, 2019).

These partnerships draw on community resources and services to address students' academic and socio-emotional needs, while also encouraging local participation in school events and initiatives (Freeman & McDonald, 2021). By leveraging community

assets, schools can create enriched learning experiences that empower students and strengthen connections between education and the broader community (Valero et al., 2021). Ultimately, Epstein's framework illustrates how intentional family and community engagement can provide a foundation of support that is especially critical for African American male students, enabling them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally despite systemic challenges.

### **Student Disengagement and Dropout**

School interventions aimed at reducing high school dropout rates must account for the complex factors contributing to student disengagement and the implications these challenges hold for designing effective strategies (Greenland & Moore, 2022). Research has shown that disciplinary practices, particularly suspensions, disproportionately impact African American male students and significantly increase their likelihood of dropping out, underscoring the need for more equitable approaches. At the same time, addressing students' personal and academic needs through individualized interventions is essential for improving retention. Targeted support systems that consider both structural barriers and student-specific concerns can create more inclusive environments and ultimately strengthen high school completion among African American males. Proactive measures such as tailored academic support and alternative educational pathways are particularly valuable for African American male students at-risk of disengagement or dropout. When such strategies are consistently applied, they not only reconnect students to school but also help rebuild confidence, foster resilience, and provide a clear path toward long-term success.

Disengagement is a key factor preceding high school dropout, as students often disconnect from school before making the decision to leave altogether (Rose & Bowen, 2021). Research shows that disengagement can contribute to broader challenges, including substance use and mental health concerns (Wallace, 2022). Socio-demographic variables such as income, gender, race, absenteeism, behavioral difficulties, and academic performance collectively shape students' likelihood of dropping out (Piscitello et al., 2022). While these risk factors are significant, they do not operate in isolation; instead, they often intersect in ways that compound challenges for vulnerable student groups. Early patterns of engagement are especially important, with evidence suggesting that strong engagement in primary school reduces truancy in later years. This shows that prevention must begin early, with consistent attention to students' sense of connection and support throughout their schooling. Truancy is further influenced by behavioral and family-related factors, which can escalate disengagement and increase dropout risk (Barthelemy et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of student disengagement and underscore the importance of targeted interventions and early prevention strategies to sustain student motivation and success (Murray et al., 2024). Ultimately, addressing these overlapping risk factors requires schools to adopt proactive, student-centered approaches that nurture both academic growth and personal resilience.

African American male students experience higher rates of disengagement from school compared to their peers, often reflected in increased absenteeism, lower academic achievement, and a greater likelihood of leaving school before graduation (Sunbal &

Jabeen, 2021). Understanding these patterns requires considering the historical, structural, and socioeconomic factors that continue to create barriers for many students. National statistics confirm this disparity: in 2019, the dropout rate for African American males aged 16 to 24 was 7.9%, compared to 4.9% for White males and 3.9% for Asian males (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These gaps underscore persistent inequities in the education system and the disproportionate challenges faced by African American students (Ogresta et al., 2021). Such disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and support systems that address systemic inequities and promote educational equity and inclusiveness (Banaji et al., 2021).

Socioeconomic disadvantages, such as poverty, and a lack of consistent support systems often create barriers to academic success. These challenges are compounded by institutional racism within schools, where biased disciplinary practices and limited access to advanced coursework restrict both growth and a sense of inclusion. Cultural disconnects between school environments and students' lived experiences can also lead to feelings of alienation, weakening their sense of belonging and reducing engagement. Further, when educators hold preconceived notions about the academic ability and behavior of African American males, students often internalize these low expectations, which undermines their motivation and participation (Gregory et al., 2021; Lindsey et al., 2021). Taken together, these factors illustrate how systemic barriers and cultural dynamics intersect to create unique challenges for African American male students. Because of this, the role of school social workers in building relationships, fostering trust,

and advocating for equity becomes especially critical in helping these students remain engaged and persist through high school.

Without a diploma, many face challenges in securing stable and well-paying employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Hensley, 2022). This lack of economic opportunity often forces young men into unstable or high-risk environments, limiting access to upward mobility and long-term security. Higher dropout rates are also associated with increased involvement in the criminal justice system, leading to incarceration and further marginalization (Gwathney, 2021). Moreover, individuals who do not complete high school experience substantially lower lifetime earnings compared to graduates, deepening socioeconomic inequalities (Hensley, 2022). Promoting high school completion and post-secondary opportunities is therefore vital for reducing economic disparities and fostering long-term social mobility. School interventions aimed at reducing high school dropout rates must account for the complex factors contributing to student disengagement and the implications these challenges hold for designing effective strategies (Greenland & Moore, 2022). Research has shown that disciplinary practices, particularly suspensions, disproportionately impact African American male students and significantly increase their likelihood of dropping out, underscoring the need for more equitable approaches (Leban & Masterson, 2022). At the same time, addressing students' personal and academic needs through individualized interventions is essential for improving retention.

Targeted support systems that consider both structural barriers and student-specific concerns can create more inclusive environments and ultimately strengthen high

school completion among African American males (Murray et al., 2024). Similarly, Zaff and Malone (2020) emphasized the importance of implementing academic standards and programs designed to reengage disconnected students with meaningful educational opportunities. Proactive measures such as tailored academic support and alternative educational pathways are particularly valuable for African American male students at risk of disengagement or dropout. According to Ewing et al. (2023), these strategies create avenues for reconnection with school, helping students rebuild confidence and establish a clear pathway toward success. When schools intentionally apply these approaches, they demonstrate a commitment to equity and provide African American male students with the tools and encouragement they need to envision and pursue brighter futures.

African American male students experience higher rates of disengagement from school compared to their peers, often reflected in increased absenteeism, lower academic achievement, and a greater likelihood of leaving school before graduation (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021). Understanding these patterns requires considering the historical, structural, and socioeconomic factors that continue to create barriers for many students. National statistics confirm this disparity: in 2019, the dropout rate for African American males aged 16 to 24 was 7.9%, compared to 4.9% for White males and 3.9% for Asian males (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These gaps underscore persistent inequities in the education system and the disproportionate challenges faced by African American students (Ogresta et al., 2021). Such disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and support systems that address systemic inequities and promote educational equity and inclusiveness (Banaji et al., 2021). Establishing equitable

educational opportunities ensures that all students, including African American males, are positioned to thrive and reach their full potential.

Multiple factors contribute to disengagement among African American male students. Socioeconomic disadvantages such as poverty, limited access to resources, and insufficient support systems often hinder academic achievement (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021). These challenges are further compounded by institutional racism within schools, where biased disciplinary practices and restricted access to advanced coursework limit both academic growth and students' sense of inclusion (Gregory et al., 2021). Cultural disconnects between school environments and students lived experiences can also create feelings of alienation, reducing their sense of belonging. Beyond structural barriers, preconceived notions about the academic ability and behavior of African American males continue to shape educators' expectations, which in turn influence students' self-perceptions and can undermine motivation and participation (Banaji et al., 2021). Together, these dynamics illustrate how individual, institutional, and cultural factors intersect to perpetuate disengagement.

The consequences of high school dropout for African American males are significant and long-lasting. Without a diploma, many face challenges in securing stable and well-paying employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Hensley, 2022). The lack of educational credentials often limits access to career training programs and advancement opportunities, leaving students with fewer pathways to upward mobility. Higher dropout rates are also associated with increased involvement in the criminal justice system, leading to incarceration and further marginalization (Gwathney, 2021).

Moreover, individuals who do not complete high school experience substantially lower lifetime earnings compared to graduates, deepening socioeconomic inequalities (Hensley, 2022). Promoting high school completion and post-secondary opportunities is therefore vital for reducing economic disparities and fostering long-term social mobility. Beyond economic hardship, dropout among African American males can negatively impact psychological well-being, self-confidence, and overall health, further compounding the long-term effects of educational disengagement (Leban & Masterson, 2022). Without a high school diploma, individuals also face limited access to higher education and fewer opportunities for personal and professional advancement, which perpetuates cycles of disadvantage. To counter these risks, interventions such as mentorship programs, culturally relevant curricula, and community-supported initiatives have shown promise in fostering academic persistence and success among African American male students (Johnson, 2023). Taken together, these efforts demonstrate the importance of addressing both structural and personal barriers to ensure that African American males have equitable opportunities to thrive in education and beyond.

### **Implications of African American Male Drop-Out**

African American males who choose to leave school face significant and diverse consequences that directly affect their academic achievement. African American males without a high school diploma often encounter substantial difficulties in obtaining steady and lucrative employment (Wallace, 2022). This constraint sustains patterns of poverty and economic volatility, impeding their capacity to attain financial prosperity and social advancement. There is also a positive association between school dropout rates and

involvement in the criminal justice system (Gwathney, 2021). African American males who fail to complete their education face an increased likelihood of imprisonment, which exacerbates their marginalization from society and restricts their prospects for achievement. Breaking this cycle through educational support and opportunity is essential for empowering these individuals and fostering a more inclusive society.

Individuals who fail to complete high school generally experience diminished incomes throughout their lives in comparison to those who obtain a high school diploma or pursue higher education (Bates & Zhang, 2024). This discrepancy in income worsens social disparities and contributes to the growing wealth imbalance between African American males and their peers who successfully finish their education. African American males who drop out of high school face limitations in their ability to pursue further education and post-secondary prospects (Murray et al., 2024). Without a diploma, individuals encounter obstacles in gaining admission to institutions or vocational training programs, further constraining their opportunities for academic and professional progression. Expanding access to educational pathways and support systems is vital for helping all individuals realize their academic and career aspirations.

African American males who drop out of school also experience negative consequences on their mental health and overall well-being due to the stigma and feelings of failure associated with this decision (Brown & Davis, 2022). They often encounter emotions such as inadequacy, embarrassment, and dissatisfaction, which impede their self-assurance and ability to persevere in reaching future objectives. Abandoning education affects the personal and professional ambitions of African American males

(Lowder et al., 2022). Insufficient educational groundwork hinders their ability to pursue interests, accomplish professional goals, and reach full potential, resulting in dissatisfaction and unfulfilled ambitions. Strengthening educational foundations is essential for empowering individuals to achieve personal fulfillment and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

The socioeconomic consequences of African American male dropout have wide-ranging effects on different aspects of society, intensifying inequalities and imposing substantial expenses (Leban & Masterson, 2022). One significant consequence is the decline in general productivity among the workforces. Many African American males who do not complete their education are frequently limited to low-paying, unstable jobs or face difficulties securing employment altogether. The underutilization of human capital is leading to missed opportunities for economic advancement and prosperity. Furthermore, increased spending on social welfare is a direct consequence of the high rate of African American male school dropouts. Individuals without high school diplomas are more prone to relying on public assistance programs, such as welfare, food stamps, and housing subsidies, to meet basic needs (Whitehead & Miller, 2024). This exerts pressure on government resources and public funds, diverting financial support from other crucial social programs designed to foster upward mobility and economic independence. Addressing educational disparities is essential to alleviating this strain, allowing resources to be invested in programs that promote long-term community growth and individual self-sufficiency.

The phenomenon of African American male dropout also has a direct effect on the escalation of healthcare expenses (Whitcomb et al., 2021). Individuals with lower levels of education are more prone to encountering adverse health consequences and enduring persistent health problems, leading to heightened utilization of healthcare services and elevated healthcare costs. This imposes a financial strain on healthcare systems and taxpayers, who ultimately assume the responsibility of providing medical care to individuals without access to preventive services and who face obstacles in accessing healthcare (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2022). Addressing these educational gaps is critical not only for individual advancement but also for reducing broader societal costs.

### **Pipeline to Prison**

The phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately impacts students from racial minority groups, particularly African American males (Tolley, 2020). High dropout rates demonstrate how educational attainment shapes life trajectories (Gregory et al., 2021). Students from marginalized communities are especially vulnerable because systemic racism, embedded in policies and discipline practices, perpetuates inequities. Black students, who represent only 15% of the student population, account for a disproportionate number of suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement referrals (Skiba et al., 2020). These punitive practices not only remove students from the learning environment but also heighten the risk of justice system involvement, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. As a result, African American male students often face exclusionary discipline at rates nearly 3.5 times higher than their

peers, underscoring the urgent need for restorative approaches that prioritize support and accountability over punishment.

Economic theory suggests that higher educational attainment is generally associated with lower rates of most types of crime (Matschke et al., 2023). Empirical evidence shows that increasing educational levels significantly decreases future violent and property crime, resulting in substantial social benefits (Valero et al., 2021). However, systemic issues such as implicit and explicit biases within the education and criminal justice systems exacerbate the problem (Maylor et al., 2021). The disproportionate application of harsh disciplinary measures against marginalized groups highlights the racial and disability disparities prevalent in these systems. Addressing these disparities is essential to creating fair and inclusive systems.

Although African American students constituted only 15% of the student population, they accounted for 31% of law enforcement referrals and arrests (Huguley et al., 2021). By comparison, White students, who represented nearly half of the population, accounted for only 36% of such referrals (Warren, 2021). This discrepancy illustrates the stark disparities that exist across the education and justice systems. The school-to-prison pipeline has been widely documented as a structural barrier to equity (Skiba et al., 2020). Zero-tolerance discipline policies exacerbate this issue, disproportionately affecting underprivileged communities (Scyster, 2025). As a result, students of color are often subjected to punitive actions rather than receiving the academic, social, and emotional supports they need to thrive (Phillippo & Crutchfield, 2021).

These findings imply that schools must adopt restorative justice approaches and trauma-informed interventions that prioritize healing and accountability over punishment. Policy reforms at the district and state levels should mandate equity-focused discipline practices and ensure that disciplinary data are tracked and publicly reported to monitor disparities. For practitioners, this means that school social workers, teachers, and administrators must collaborate to provide consistent support that keeps students engaged in learning environments rather than pushing them out. Future research could explore the long-term outcomes of restorative practices in reducing both exclusionary discipline and dropout rates among African American male students.

To tackle these underlying problems, it was necessary to implement extensive changes that aimed at eliminating harsh disciplinary methods and promoting inclusive, supportive learning environments for every student (Gregory et al., 2021). Such reforms require collaboration among educators, policymakers, families, and community stakeholders to create systems that prioritize equity and student well-being over punishment. Only through a concerted effort to reform educational and judicial practices could society hope to dismantle the pipeline to prison and ensure a fair and just future for all children (Scyster, 2025).

The expenses associated with law enforcement, legal proceedings, incarceration, and rehabilitation place a heavy economic burden on taxpayers and society (Leban & Masterson, 2022). Beyond the financial implications, these outcomes reflect systemic shortcomings that could have been mitigated through earlier educational support. To reduce long-term costs and promote equity, students require targeted academic and social

interventions that address both educational outcomes and systemic barriers. Research highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching, equitable resource allocation, and supportive school environments in improving retention and achievement for African American male students (Goings et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2024). Schools in predominantly African American communities often experience inadequate funding, leading to larger class sizes, fewer extracurricular opportunities, and outdated materials, all of which contribute to higher dropout rates (Matschke et al., 2023). These challenges are compounded by implicit biases and lower expectations from educators, which negatively affect students' performance and self-esteem. Creating awareness, fostering high expectations, and intentionally building affirming school environments are, therefore, essential steps toward empowering students.

### **Academic Risk Factors**

African American students who faced academic challenges, such as low grades, course failures, or learning difficulties, often experienced discouragement and disconnection from their schools (Murray et al., 2024). Persistent academic struggles undermined their confidence and sense of future opportunity, and limited support from teachers, counselors, or peers reinforced feelings of marginalization (Johnson, 2023). This marginalization further restricted access to advanced courses, enrichment activities, and leadership opportunities, deepening inequities in both academic and social experiences (Goings et al., 2020). Additionally, African American students frequently encountered lower expectations from educators due to implicit biases, which, coupled with racial discrimination, created a hostile school climate (Banaji et al., 2021; Phillippo

& Crutchfield, 2021). In the absence of adequate academic support, students often developed disillusionment toward the educational system, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and higher dropout rates (Whitcomb et al., 2021). Implementing culturally responsive teaching is therefore essential for fostering inclusive classrooms where African American male students feel valued and supported. Culturally affirming practices strengthen student–teacher connections, promote academic success, and reduce disengagement, whereas their absence can exacerbate feelings of exclusion (Clark-Louque & Latunde, 2019). These findings underscore that culturally responsive instruction is not merely a pedagogical preference but a necessary strategy for advancing equity and improving long-term student retention.

### **Educational Resources**

Insufficient educational resources, such as experienced teachers, up-to-date textbooks, and extracurricular programs, continue to hinder the academic advancement of African American students (Banaji et al., 2021). These inequities worsen when resources are unevenly distributed across schools and districts, leaving many students frustrated and questioning their chances of success. Beyond resource gaps, the strong focus on high stakes standardized testing has been shown to heighten stress and anxiety, particularly when students perceive the assessments as biased or culturally irrelevant (Milner, 2019). The resulting pressure often leads to feelings of inadequacy and disengagement, with some students ultimately withdrawing from school (Morris & Perry, 2016). Providing alternative measures of success and more inclusive support enables students to view themselves as capable, motivated learners. Addressing these inequities is not only a

matter of fairness but also a critical step to ensure African American male students have equitable opportunities for long-term academic achievement.

The unequal distribution of resources means that students in underfunded schools often lack access to updated instructional materials and technology, limiting both their daily learning experiences and their preparation for higher education and competitive job markets. In contrast, schools in affluent areas benefit from stronger funding, which translated into modern facilities, broader extracurricular options, and access to advanced placement courses, giving those students a significant advantage (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2022). Access to qualified and experienced teachers is another critical factor, yet schools in low-income districts, often serving larger populations of African American students, struggle to recruit and retain them. These disparities reinforce cycles of inequity, reducing opportunities for rigorous and engaging learning.

Extracurricular activities, crucial for holistic student development, were less accessible in underfunded schools, limiting opportunities for students to explore interests, develop talents, and acquire skills essential for college and future careers (Bryan & Henry, 2020). Without these opportunities, many students felt disengaged and disconnected from their school communities, further widening gaps in engagement. Emphasis on high stakes standardized testing places additional stress on African American students and contributing to anxiety when exams were perceived as culturally biased or disconnected from students' lived experiences (Milner, 2019). These assessments disproportionately affected minority students, leading to lower performance outcomes and perpetuating cycles of academic disadvantage (Morris & Perry, 2016). The

pressure to perform under such conditions often fostered feelings of inadequacy and disengagement, increasing the likelihood of dropout. Implementing more supportive and holistic assessment approaches can help students remain engaged, confident, and motivated throughout their educational journey.

### **School Climate**

African American students who encountered a negative school climate, marked by prejudice, harassment, or racial microaggressions, often experienced a sense of isolation and insecurity within their academic setting (Phillippo & Crutchfield, 2021). When schools provided supportive relationships and high expectations, African American males were more likely to engage in academic activities and perform well academically. Conversely, schools with negative climates marked by low expectations and discriminatory practices contributed to lower academic performance and increased dropout rates (Gregory et al., 2021). An adverse school atmosphere obstructed academic engagement and hindered students' ability to succeed academically. African American students who perceived limited academic opportunities, such as access to advanced coursework, college preparatory programs, or guidance resources, often became discouraged about their chances of future success (Maylor et al., 2021). These perceived academic dead end contributed to feelings of disengagement and resignation regarding their educational journey.

A hostile school climate had profound effects on the academic performance of African American students (Banaji et al., 2021). Beyond academic barriers, the emotional toll of such environments created feelings of alienation and distrust toward the school

system. Frequent exposure to racial microaggressions, which are subtle and often unintentionally discriminatory comments or behaviors, resulted in elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Schools with a negative climate also exhibited disproportionately high rates of disciplinary actions against African American students, contributing to disengagement and academic failure (Gregory et al., 2021). Elevated suspension and expulsion rates play a role in the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2020).

These disciplinary practices further distance students from the educational system, reinforcing cycles of inequity. By contrast, implementing restorative practices provided pathways to reconnect students with their education and fostered supportive school climates that promoted academic success (Clark-Louque & Latunde, 2019). Such approaches not only reduce exclusionary discipline but also create environments where African American male students feel valued, supported, and motivated to remain engaged in their learning. In addition to direct discrimination, the perception of limited academic opportunities significantly impacted students' motivation and aspirations (Bristol, 2021). When African American students saw few role models in advanced courses or college preparatory programs, they often internalized the belief that such achievements were unattainable. This perception was reinforced by a lack of encouragement and support from educators who, whether consciously or unconsciously, held lower expectations for these students (Goings et al., 2020). Such an environment not only restricted access to academic opportunities but also diminished students' confidence and motivation to strive for success (Maylor et al., 2021).

### **School Social Workers and Students' Academic Achievement**

School social workers play a role in promoting students' holistic development within educational settings (Bates & Zhang, 2024; Beck & Hämäläinen, 2022). In this role, they addressed a wide range of issues that directly influenced academic achievement. They also provided culturally responsive interventions (Beck & Hämäläinen, 2022). Beyond academic support, their efforts helped foster stronger connections and trust between home and school, ensuring that students felt understood and supported. Through collaboration with teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders, school social workers fostered inclusive environments (Tan et al., 2020).

School social workers assist students with challenges connected to family, school, and community, supporting both their well-being and academic achievement. Teachers and parents often note the positive impact of social work services on student performance, reflecting the value of these supports in improving academic outcomes. In practice, social workers address barriers such as attendance problems, behavioral concerns, and socio-emotional needs, which help foster stronger academic engagement. Their collaboration with families and community partners expands the support network available to students, creating greater resilience and promoting success for African American males. Researchers have highlighted that when educators, families, and community stakeholders work together, inclusive environments are built that meet diverse needs and ensure students feel valued and supported (Bates & Zhang, 2024; Bryan & Henry, 2020).

### **Positive Intervention and Mentorship**

Valero et al. (2021) emphasized the role of school social workers as practitioners, suggesting that they should develop interventions in collaboration with the community to support students effectively. At the same time, the realities of practice often present barriers that complicate how these interventions are delivered. School social workers provide mentorship, tutoring, and other resources tailored to students' needs (Kelly et al., 2021; Valero et al., 2021). Beyond collaboration, their work required creativity and persistence to ensure that interventions remained culturally relevant and responsive to students lived experiences. School social workers also addressed systemic barriers, implemented culturally responsive strategies, and advocated for equitable opportunities (Khalifa, 2021; Villarreal Sosa & Martin, 2021). By combining socioemotional support with access to community resources, school social workers helped foster resilience. Their influence extended beyond the classroom, offering stability and encouragement that empowered students to envision and pursue brighter futures.

Alzamil (2021) wrote that school social workers developed counseling programs to address students' psychological problems, contributing to improved academic outcomes. Counseling programs benefited African American male students who faced unique socioemotional challenges that affected their academic performance. Additionally, Bates and Zhang (2024) found that school social workers ensure students access academic tutoring and attendance improvement programs. By advocating implementing targeted interventions, school social workers promoted the academic success of students (Lindsey et al., 2021).

Connors et al. (2021) asserted the need for interventions, particularly for students experiencing trauma, highlighting the role of school social workers in providing essential support for student success. Building on this perspective, other scholars have examined how flexible and innovative educational environments can better serve students whose needs are not met in traditional settings. Ewing et al. (2023) and Lowder et al. (2022) explored alternative school settings and intervention programs, suggesting that tailored approaches positively affected student achievement and retention. Kearney et al. (2023) advocated interventions that promoted school engagement and addressed disciplinary practices that disproportionately affected diverse students.

Mentorship programs, academic tutoring, leadership development initiatives, and socioemotional support services were examples of effective interventions that promoted success (Connors et al., 2021; Kearney et al., 2023; Lowder et al., 2022). Support systems were essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment where every student had the opportunity to succeed and flourish.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

Pham et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of teacher-student relationships in fostering school engagement for students experiencing difficulties in school. These findings align with the broader theme of school social workers' role in supporting student success by collaborating with teachers to strengthen positive teacher-student relationships, which in turn enhance student engagement and well-being. By fostering communication and trust, school social workers can create a supportive environment where students feel valued and understood (Villarreal Sosa & Martin, 2021). This

foundation of trust empowers students to engage more fully in their education and personal growth.

African American and Latino male students continue to experience disproportionately high rates of disengagement and dropout compared to their peers, a trend that reflects broader systemic inequities (Matschke et al., 2023). One contributing factor is the prevalence of exclusionary discipline, which removes students from classrooms and disrupts their sense of belonging. These practices not only reduce instructional time but also reinforce cycles of marginalization within the school system. By focusing on equitable practices and nurturing supportive relationships, schools can begin to close opportunity gaps.

Bryan and Henry (2020) identified that included school climate, respect and contempt, experiences of discrimination, aspirations, supportive factors, and obstacles to academic achievement. These findings are relevant to the present study because they highlight how both positive and negative school interactions can shape students' motivation, engagement, and persistence. Students' perceptions of relationships, respect, and unequal treatment within their school environments shaped their sense of belonging. Although they encountered challenges in their academic pursuits, many remained hopeful and emphasized the importance of building meaningful connections with their teachers (Bristol, 2021). Morris and Perry (2016) explored how racial discrimination and stereotypes related to masculinity contribute to disproportionate suspension rates among African American males, affecting their educational environment and outcomes.

Furthermore, Byrd (2020) explored how school environments that segregate and discriminate against Black students, particularly boys, perpetuate negative stereotypes and hinder their academic progress. However, some policies and practices still send disconfirming messages to Black students and other historically marginalized groups, signaling that their presence and contributions are undervalued. Over time, this lack of affirmation can create negative school climates that contribute to feelings of isolation, reduced academic motivation, and even adverse mental health outcomes (Killen & Rutland, 2022). Creating a positive school climate is essential for fostering students' sense of belonging, motivation, and overall well-being.

Strong teacher-student interactions can act as a protective factor against dropout and disinterest in school. When African American male students feel valued and respected, they persist through challenges. Beyond academics, positive teacher-student ties foster social-emotional growth and resilience, equipping students with skills that contribute to long-term success (Gregory et al., 2021; Huguley et al., 2021). Teachers can establish a nurturing atmosphere by cultivating trust, empathy, and clear communication, which allows students to feel secure in expressing themselves and seeking help when necessary. Such supportive connections not only encourage resilience but also provide a strong foundation for lifelong success. Students' own attitudes and behaviors influence the quality of these relationships, highlighting the importance of strategies that are responsive to both educators and learners. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, schools can create environments where teachers and students alike feel supported and empowered to succeed.

Teachers can strengthen teacher-student relationships and improve academic outcomes (Huxtable, 2022). Professional development that emphasizes emotional intelligence and communication skills can further equip educators to connect with their students in meaningful ways. Beyond teaching strategies, targeted support for at-risk students is especially critical, as these learners often require additional resources and attention to thrive both academically and socially (Goings et al., 2020). In practice, school social workers collaborate with teachers to design personalized strategies that build rapport and trust, ensuring students feel valued and supported. By prioritizing communication and trust, educators and social workers together create a school culture where students' strengths are recognized, their challenges are addressed, and their potential is nurtured for long-term success.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Researchers have explored the causes, outcomes, and potential solutions. School experiences for African American male students should include strong support mechanisms to foster both academic success and overall well-being (Hensley, 2022). Schools should create a more inclusive and supportive environment for students (Gwathney, 2021). Schools should also enable students to achieve their educational goals (Gatson & Enslin, 2021). School partnerships are essential for creating a supportive network that empowered students (Greenland & Moore, 2022). These partnerships build a strong foundation of support, helping students excel in all areas of life.

School support systems are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by African American male students, contributing to improved retention and academic

success. Academic support and alternative pathways, such as tutoring or credit-recovery programs, help students remain connected to school when traditional approaches fall short (Zaff & Malone, 2020). Factors such as income, race, absenteeism, and behavioral challenges also influence dropout decisions, underscoring that disengagement is rarely caused by a single issue but rather a combination of overlapping circumstances (Rose & Bowen, 2021). Understanding this complexity highlights why targeted interventions and early prevention strategies are so important. African American male students face disproportionate rates of disengagement, making school-based strategies such as mentorship, culturally relevant curricula, and community partnerships especially valuable in keeping them engaged and motivated (Barthelemy et al., 2022). Dropping out not only disrupts educational progress but also limits personal and professional ambitions. By contrast, sustained engagement in school empowers students to pursue broader prospects for the future.

African American male dropout rates remain high, underscoring the need for schools to focus on building supportive academic environments that promote persistence and success (Sasaki & Baba, 2024). Beyond basic instruction, students thrive when they feel encouraged and supported by educators who recognize both their potential and their challenges. Without this support, students are more likely to disengage from school, which contributes to higher dropout rates and lower overall academic achievement (Whitcomb et al., 2021). Opportunities to participate in school activities can help counter this disengagement by allowing students to explore interests, develop talents, and strengthen skills that prepare them for college and future careers (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

At the same time, limited access to advanced coursework or college-preparatory resources can leave students disheartened about their prospects. Beyond academics, they assist students in navigating family, school, and community challenges, which strengthened both their well-being and their academic performance. Counseling, mentorship, and leadership development initiatives offer emotional support and create opportunities for personal growth, while collaboration with teachers helped build stronger classroom relationships that fostered engagement and belonging. When these supports are absent, students often felt isolated and disconnected from learning, increasing their risk of disengagement. Taken together, these insights highlight the importance of comprehensive, relationship-centered interventions that can counter systemic inequities and promote academic success.

As Chapter 3 outlines, these findings inform the methodological choices of this study, including the selection of participants, data collection strategies, and analytical approach. The next chapter details how the research design was structured to capture school social workers' perspectives and provide trustworthy insights into the strategies that support retention among African American male high school students.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies they use to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. The research site is an urban school district located in the Northern United States. This study uses a qualitative design to examine this phenomenon through semistructured one-on-one interviews with school social workers. In this chapter, I present the research design and rationale, followed by a description of the role of the researcher as a novice investigator. The chapter then explains the participant recruitment and selection process and the procedures for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness, potential threats to validity, and the ethical procedures followed throughout the study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question for this study is:

RQ1: What are school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies they use to reduce the dropout rates of African American males in a high school in an urban local school district in the Northern United States?

The research problem addressed in this basic qualitative study is that 34% of African American male students have dropped out of high school in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States. This study uses a qualitative method because it focuses on exploring school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies they use to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male

students. A qualitative study is appropriate for exploring interviewees' perceptions to answer the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I collected qualitative data from school social workers in an urban public school district located in the Northern United States to address the research question. The interviews were semistructured and conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Qualitative research provides a rigorous approach to examining complex social phenomena (Patton, 2015) and is particularly suited for research questions that require detailed and layered examination (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative researchers often use interviews to explore participants' perspectives in depth (Ravitch & Carl, 2019), making this approach well-suited for the present study. In addition, qualitative methods are especially valuable when investigating under-researched topics and can generate new theories, hypotheses, and conceptual frameworks (Ploder & Hamann, 2021). Ploder and Hamann (2021) argued that these methods address complex issues that resist simple quantification and require thorough analysis. For this study, a basic qualitative design is most appropriate because it uses semistructured interviews as the single data collection strategy and supports a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers and cultural contexts that influence African American male student dropout rates.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies they used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. The researcher used semistructured interviews so that participants could describe their experiences in their own words,

providing rich, contextual insights that numerical measures alone could not capture. This method was particularly valuable given the limited prior research on this population and the complexity of the social and cultural factors influencing dropout rates. Ravitch and Carl (2019) noted that interviews are a powerful tool for accessing participants' lived experiences, and a basic qualitative design was well suited when a single data collection strategy was used. In this study, conducting interviews allowed participants to share their perspectives, which supported a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers and supports affecting African American male students.

The researcher did not select a mixed methods approach because it requires gathering both numerical and descriptive data, which this study did not need. The researcher also did not choose quantitative design because the study did not include numeric data. The researcher considered but ultimately rejected ethnography, phenomenology, and case study designs. Ethnography did not fit the purpose of the study because it focuses on examining cultural groups over time. Phenomenology was unsuitable because the study did not address the lived experiences of individuals. A case study design did not align with the research focus, which examines perceptions related to dropout strategies rather than an in-depth exploration of a bounded system or group behaviors.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography is a qualitative research design used to explore cultural phenomena and to understand the behaviors, interactions, and perceptions of a group within its natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is most useful when researchers seek to

develop a deep, contextual understanding of a group over an extended period, often through immersion and longitudinal observation. Ethnography was not selected for this study because the purpose was not to examine cultural rituals, behaviors, or patterns over time. Instead, the focus was on school social workers' perceptions of strategies to reduce dropout rates, rather than on documenting the lived cultural experiences of students themselves. Ethnography also requires a level of cultural immersion that was beyond the scope and timeframe of this study.

### **Grounded theory**

Grounded theory, in contrast, emphasizes developing new theoretical frameworks directly from systematically collected and analyzed data (Belgrave & Seide, 2019; Charmaz, 2014). This approach is particularly useful when existing theories are insufficient to explain a phenomenon or when a researcher intends to build a conceptual model from emerging themes (Campbell et al., 2020). Since the aim was to describe and interpret experiences rather than construct a theoretical framework, a basic qualitative approach was most fitting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This design enabled focused data collection on school social workers' perspectives without the iterative requirements of theory development.

### **Case Study**

A case study design is often chosen when researchers seek a holistic, in-depth investigation that examines group behaviors or cultural practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach typically involves triangulating multiple sources of data to

strengthen the findings. The focus of this study was not on group behaviors or cultural practices.

### **Basic Qualitative Method**

I explored school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. I explored the participants' perceptions to answer the research question by interviewing school social workers from an urban public school district in the Northern United States. The interviews were semistructured via Zoom and lasted for about 45 minutes to 1 hour. I asked the participants open-ended interview questions and analyzed the qualitative data using thematic analysis.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role in this study was to serve as a novice qualitative researcher. I brought more than 26 years of experience as an educator, school social worker, and advocate for students to this research. I provided comprehensive services to parents, students in Grades 6–12, and school staff. In addition, I supervised Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work students from both local universities and virtual programs, offering mentorship and guidance throughout their field experiences.

My professional responsibilities included (a) evaluating student progress, delivering constructive feedback, and ensuring compliance with educational and professional standards; (b) collaborating with academic institutions to align supervision with curriculum objectives and addressing issues related to student fieldwork; (c) serving as a liaison between students and universities, advocating for student needs and ensuring

access to necessary resources; (d) maintaining ongoing advocacy to meet student needs; and (e) providing in-service training to faculty and staff on protocols and procedures for referrals and social work services.

I asked participants open-ended interview questions about the research phenomenon. I conducted semistructured interviews using the interview protocol (Appendix A). This approach enabled rich and flexible data collection by allowing participants to express their perceptions in their own words, which was essential for exploring complex social issues (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). As a qualitative researcher, I maintained professionalism and adhered to ethical research standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By maintaining these standards, I ensured that participants felt respected and that the study upheld integrity throughout the research process.

To support this integrity, I recorded field notes during data collection to reduce potential bias and maintain accuracy when interpreting participants' perspectives. I reflected on my role throughout the study and kept a reflexivity journal to minimize my influence on the data and enhance the credibility of the research. Reflexivity remained critical in acknowledging and managing my subjectivity, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as educational equity. I monitored my biases and avoided interpreting participants' perceptions through the lens of my personal opinions regarding the retention of African American high school male students. I also took detailed field notes throughout the research process. These practices supported the trustworthiness of the findings by promoting transparency and rigor in data collection and analysis. Collectively, these actions enhanced the credibility and integrity of the research and

ensured that the findings accurately represented participants' perspectives while upholding the highest standards of qualitative inquiry.

### **Methodology**

I used a basic qualitative design to examine school social workers' perceptions of the strategies they applied to reduce dropout rates among African American high school male students. I focused on description and interpretation rather than prediction or measurement, making it appropriate for exploring participants' experiences within their professional context. I conducted semistructured interviews as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share their perspectives in depth and in their own words, which was essential for addressing the research question.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The research site was an urban public school district in the Northern United States, and the participants were school social workers. The district employed approximately 100 school social workers. To address the research problem, I established selection criteria requiring participants to have experience working with African American male high school dropouts. I applied purposive sampling, a widely used nonprobability technique in qualitative research, to identify participants who could provide meaningful and relevant insights. This method ensures the collection of information-rich cases and aligns data collection with the study's goals (Campbell et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). By intentionally selecting social workers who met the criteria, I prioritized the perspectives of those with direct experience supporting African American male students at-risk of dropping out. This purposive sampling approach increased both

the depth and relevance of the data. Following this process, I recruited 10 participants for the study.

### **Instrumentation**

Interviews in this study were guided by a specific research question and conducted using a structured interview protocol. Taherdoost (2022) asserted that aligning interview questions with the research purpose is essential to ensure that the data collected is both relevant and meaningful. In this study, the questions were carefully designed to directly address the research aims and to foster an inquiry-based conversation that encouraged participants to share their perspectives in depth. The semistructured interview approach encouraged participants to share detailed perspectives and experiences while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes. The data was collected via semistructured interviews to explore the perceptions of the participants. The conceptual framework and the literature review were used to develop the interview protocol containing the interview questions (Appendix A). Three retired school social workers reviewed the interview protocol for clarity and ambiguity. Based on their feedback, the interview questions were finalized and included in the interview protocol (Appendix A). These retired social workers did not participate in the study.

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

After IRB approval, I began the data collection process. I used the district's public website to obtain the names and emails of potential participants. I sent an email with a flyer (Appendix B) attached containing the study details to all school social workers. When potential participants responded to the email expressing interest, I sent a second

email with the informed consent form (Appendix C), and a request for them to reply with "I consent" if they wished to participate in the study.

Potential participants who replied "I consent" were contacted via email and scheduled for interviews. I worked with each participant to identify a mutually agreeable time slot, ensuring flexibility to accommodate their schedules. Each interview was conducted on the Zoom platform and lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. I took several steps to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the school district involved in this study. Neither the participants' names nor the name of the school district was revealed at any point in the research or in the final dissertation. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names to protect participants' identities. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. To address potential risks associated with discussing sensitive topics, participants were informed that they had the right to skip any questions they were uncomfortable answering or to terminate the interview at any point. This approach was designed to mitigate any distress and ensure that participants felt fully supported throughout the interview process.

During each interview, I took detailed notes and ensured that professionalism and rapport were maintained with each participant. Taking detailed field notes during interviews helped me capture important nuances and minimize reliance on memory alone. A qualitative researcher must maintain professionalism and adhere to ethical research standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This adherence to ethics included respecting participant confidentiality and being mindful of my personality throughout the study. Researchers also take field notes to minimize their biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This

practice helped ensure that research findings were objective and accurately reflected participants' experiences.

I reflected on my role in this study and kept a reflexivity journal to minimize my influence on the data and increase the credibility of the research. Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research to acknowledge and manage the researchers' potential biases. I monitored my research biases and avoided misinterpreting participants' perceptions through the lens of my personal opinions about the retention of African American high school male students. Additionally, I took detailed field notes throughout the research process, which helped capture contextual information and supported data accuracy.

I used member checking by sharing the transcripts or research findings with participants to confirm accuracy and verify that my interpretations aligned with participants' experiences and intentions. This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research by actively involving participants in validating the data. I included member checking as part of the data validation process, giving participants the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts. Ravitch and Carl (2019) noted that this practice allows participants to review and validate both the interview transcripts and the interpretations of their responses, which supports the accuracy and authenticity of the findings. I ensured that participants' perspectives were accurately represented, which contributed to the credibility of the research results. By implementing these rigorous data collection and ethical procedures, I produced a comprehensive and trustworthy analysis of participants' perspectives while safeguarding their rights and well-being throughout the study.

I reminded participants that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. I encouraged participants to ask questions throughout the interview process and emphasized that I would keep all responses confidential. I also informed participants that a follow-up interview might be necessary to clarify or expand on their responses.

I used the interview protocol (Appendix A) to collect qualitative, in-depth data that directly addressed the research question. I designed the protocol to facilitate open and honest dialogue and to encourage participants to share their perceptions of leadership practices aimed at retaining African American high school males. I scheduled interviews flexibly to accommodate participants' availability and ensure the process did not impose an undue burden.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, I assigned numerical identifiers to each participant. This strategy safeguarded their identities throughout the research process (Kynge et al., 2020). These measures reinforced ethical standards, protected participants' privacy, and helped build trust in the research process.

I stored audio recordings of the interviews on a password-protected laptop and encrypted all files to prevent unauthorized access. I protected the transcriptions in the same manner, making them accessible only to the research team. I also backed up all data on an encrypted external drive to prevent information loss. I will retain the data for 5 years after publication in accordance with institutional guidelines, after which I will securely delete it. I stored physical documents and notes in a locked cabinet and will shred them after the retention period.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I identified emergent themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) described coding as an iterative approach that organizes data, allowing the researcher to assign meaning. I applied this process by reviewing and segmenting the transcripts to capture key ideas connected to the research question. Thematic analysis then guided the interpretation of these codes, which, as noted by Bazeley (2020) and Naeem et al. (2023), is used to identify patterns. I ensured that data were interpreted systematically and that participants' voices were meaningfully represented.

I used inductive analysis to read each interview transcript and code the data to identify categories. I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to systematically organize, code, and analyze the data. I applied open and axial coding to identify relationships and refine themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process involved searching for keywords and phrases, charting them using open and axial coding techniques, and mapping connections between codes and categories. NVivo facilitated the identification of similar keywords and phrases, the grouping of codes into categories, and the recognition of themes (Nowell et al., 2017). I continued this iterative charting process until reaching data saturation, repeating it until no new keywords, categories, or subcategories emerged (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I derived themes from these categories and subcategories, which provided a structured understanding of the data and revealed key insights and patterns relevant to the study.

I reported discrepant or negative cases to maintain the credibility of this qualitative study. Scholars emphasize that examining outliers challenges emerging

patterns, refines interpretations, and strengthens the overall credibility of findings by considering alternative explanations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Including these cases acknowledged the complexity of the data and demonstrated a commitment to transparency in the analytic process. In this study, I identified and reported discrepant cases within the findings. I applied rigorous validation techniques to further ensure the trustworthiness of the results.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

I aimed to produce trustworthy and valuable insights into the perceptions of the participants, ultimately contributing to the broader field of educational research.

Trustworthiness refers to a set of criteria that ensured the research project is conducted with competence and ethical integrity (Nguyen et al., 2021; Rallis & Rossman, 2009). I ensured trustworthiness for the credibility this study. To achieve this, I focused on four key aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these criteria played a critical role in establishing the overall rigor and reliability of the research findings.

#### **Credibility**

Patton (2015) stated that qualitative research is a rigorous approach and highlighted the importance of ensuring credibility. In this study, I prioritized credibility by implementing techniques such as triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity, all of which are widely recognized as essential strategies to validate the accuracy and trustworthiness of qualitative data (Kyngäs et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I ensured

that the findings were both accurate and trustworthy, strengthening the integrity of the study.

To further enhance credibility, I included discrepant or negative cases in the findings. Reporting these cases, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), helped challenge emerging patterns and ensured a more balanced and nuanced interpretation of the data. Including such outliers demonstrated that alternative perspectives were considered, reinforcing the study's integrity.

I maintained a reflexivity journal throughout the research process. This journal was used to allow me to document my assumptions that could influence interactions with participants and the interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By actively reflecting on how my personal and professional experiences might shape the research process, I engaged in ongoing self-awareness to identify and mitigate bias. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that reflexivity journals are essential tools for tracking predispositions and increasing transparency. Similarly, Patton (2015) emphasized that reflexivity journals provide researchers with a structured means of documenting their biases and assumptions, supporting an ongoing effort to minimize reactivity and maintain objectivity throughout the study.

To strengthen credibility, I used member checking with the participants to review their transcripts and provide feedback on whether their responses were accurately captured. This technique not only helped confirm the accuracy of the data but also reinforced a collaborative research approach in which participants were viewed as active contributors rather than passive subjects (Birt et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Although some participants chose not to engage deeply in the review process, as Birt et al. (2016) noted can occur, the opportunity to participate enhanced transparency and supported the overall trustworthiness of the findings. By incorporating this strategy, I addressed potential discrepancies and built a more credible and dependable account of participants' perspectives, in alignment with established qualitative research standards.

### **Transferability**

In this study, detailed descriptions allowed readers to make judgments about the findings and their applicability to other urban districts (Denzin et al., 2023). Additionally, I included direct excerpts from participant interviews, which added contextual depth and enabled meaningful comparisons across similar populations or educational challenges. Participant characteristics strengthened transferability by offering transparency into the conditions under which the data were collected.

I also employed member checking, a critical component of establishing descriptive and interpretive validity in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I minimized the risk of misrepresentation or researcher bias. This collaborative validation process ensured the overall rigor and credibility of this study

### **Dependability**

A detailed audit trail was created to capture decisions made throughout the study, providing transparency into how findings were derived. This audit trail included notes on methodological choices, interview protocols, and thematic development, which enabled others to assess the logical flow and consistency of the study (Janis, 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Dependability in qualitative research involves documenting the research

process in a way that allows others to trace how conclusions were reached, thereby strengthening the reliability of the findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2023). Such transparency fosters trust in the findings and supports the potential for replication or adaptation in future research.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability emphasizes objectivity and traceability of data to its sources, ensuring transparency in how findings are derived (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Confirmability emphasizes transparency in how the information was analyzed and interpreted (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was established through a reflexive journal, triangulation, and an audit trail. I consistently recorded personal reflections, values, and potential biases (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, triangulation and transparent reporting of data analysis procedures further strengthened confirmability by ensuring that the research conclusions were clearly linked to the data rather than researcher assumptions (Janis, 2022). Together, these measures reinforced the objectivity of the study and demonstrated a commitment to presenting findings that authentically represented participants' voices.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I successfully completed all my research courses at Walden University and obtained the CITI certification. I also successfully completed the human research participants courses via the National Institutes of Health. Upon IRB approval, I began the data collection process. I collected qualitative data and saved it on my password-protected laptop. I will keep the interview transcripts and reflexivity journal for 5 years in

accordance with IRB guidelines. As an employee at the urban public school district, specifically serving students at a virtual middle school, I clarified that I did not hold any authoritative role over the participants, who were school social workers employed at high schools.

A reflexivity journal is an essential tool in qualitative research, allowing researchers to record their assumptions, reflections, and evolving perspectives throughout the study (Nguyen et al., 2021). Reflexivity in this sense involved ensuring transparency in how the research relationship was managed (Janis, 2022). Actively engaging in this process supported the transparency and credibility of the study. Another limitation was the timeframe available for conducting the interviews, which may have constrained scheduling flexibility and participant availability.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I presented research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, participant selection criteria, and the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. I also detailed the data analysis plan, including the use of thematic analysis and member checking to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings. Additionally, I discussed strategies to ensure the study's trustworthiness, addressing the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I carefully outlined the potential threats to validity and the ethical procedures implemented to protect participants' confidentiality and integrity throughout the research process. In Chapter 4, I will present the findings of the study, analyzing the data collected to draw conclusions and provide insights into the perceptions of school social workers regarding

the effectiveness of strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies designed to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students. I used a qualitative design and conducted semistructured, one-on-one interviews with school social workers to examine this phenomenon. In this chapter, I present the research design and rationale, followed by a description of my role as a novice investigator. The research question asked: What are school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American males in a high school in an urban local school district in the Northern United States? This chapter describes the study setting, data collection procedures, and the analysis of interview transcripts. I include excerpts from the transcripts within each theme. The chapter concludes with evidence of trustworthiness.

### **Setting**

The research site was an urban public school district in the Northern United States. The participants were school social workers. The population of school social workers was about 100. The selection criteria included school social workers from an urban public school in the Northern United States who had experienced working with African American male high school dropouts.

### **Demographics**

I interviewed 10 school social workers from an urban public school district in the Northern United States. The participants were those who had experienced working with African American male high school dropouts. Two school social workers were male, and eight were female. The number of years as school administrators was between 3 and 20 years.

### **Data Collection**

I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University (IRB approval #03-21-25-0289629). I followed IRB guidelines to recruit and interview participants and to protect their confidentiality. I collected, transcribed, and stored interview data in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years, as required by IRB guidelines. I also securely stored the reflexivity journal in a locked file cabinet.

I invited all participants via email to participate in interviews. I obtained email addresses from the main website of the research site. The email included the purpose statement, the significance of the study, and the informed consent form, and I asked participants to reply with “I consent” if they chose to participate. Each participant received information that I would not reveal their names or school names in the findings to protect confidentiality. I audio-recorded all interviews with the permission of each participant and used the interview protocol (Appendix A) to guide the questions. I transcribed the interviews after each session. I used member checking with each participant to ensure the accuracy of the themes. The participants did not request revisions to the themes. In this chapter, I include excerpts from participants’ responses.

## **Data Analysis**

I used NVivo software to systematically organize and manage the interview transcripts. I read each transcript multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses and to immerse myself in the data. I applied an inductive analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017).

I analyzed the transcripts, which enabled a layered examination of participants' perspectives (Bazeley, 2020). During axial coding, I grouped codes into categories and subcategories (Bazeley, 2020). From these categories, distinct themes emerged, providing structure and coherence to the qualitative findings (Naeem et al., 2023). I reviewed all codes multiple times and confirmed saturation when no new information, codes, or themes appeared.

I examined the final emergent themes for consistency across participants' responses. Additionally, two retired school social workers, each with extensive field experience, reviewed the interview questions before data collection. After data analysis, these same reviewers provided feedback on the emergent themes.

## **Results**

To protect participants' confidentiality, I used pseudonyms. I assigned the first participant the pseudonym P1, where the letter P represents participant. Theme 1 included these common keywords: importance, building, strong, relationships, fostering, trust, particularly with African American male students, teacher, administrative, support, critical, factor, ensuring, success. The common phrases were the importance of building strong relationships, fostering trust, African American male students, teacher and

administrative support, a critical factor in ensuring success, and African American male students. These findings indicated that relational connections and school-based support contributed centrally to students' success, which led to the development of Theme 2: Relational and school-based support structures.

Theme 2 included these common keywords: importance, providing, holistic, support, family, engagement, strategies, the role of community involvement, integral, success, African American male students. The common phrases were family engagement, family strategies, African American male students, the importance of providing holistic support, the role of the community, integral in the success. I defined Theme 2 as Holistic, family, and community-based support systems.

Theme 3 included these common keywords: cultural, relevance, representation, education, need, representation, African American male students, and teaching. The common phrases were the need for representation in teaching, cultural relevance, and representation in education for African American male students. I defined Theme 3 as Cultural representation and relevance in education.

Theme 4 included these common keywords: advocacy and African American male students. The common phrases were advocacy for African American male students. I defined Theme 4 as Advocacy for African American male students.

Theme 5 included these common keywords: addressing, disparities, systemic, and barriers. The common phrases were addressing disparities and systemic barriers. I defined Theme 5 as Systemic barriers and educational disparities. The themes appear in Table 1.

**Table 1***Themes*

Theme	Theme Description
1	Relational and School-Based Support Structures for African American Male Students
2	Holistic, Family, and Community-Based Support Systems for African American Male Students
3	Cultural Representation and Relevance in Education for African American Male Students
4	Advocacy for African American Male Students
5	Addressing Systemic Barriers and Educational Disparities for African American Male Students

### **Theme 1: Relational and School-Based Support Structures for African American Male Students**

Participants emphasized the importance of building strong relationships and fostering trust as foundational to reducing dropout rates among African American male students. Establishing meaningful connections with students, families, and the broader community was described as essential for supporting engagement and persistence in school. As P2 explained, “Building relationships with the students is essential. Once they know that you genuinely care about them, they are more likely to open up and engage with their work.” P5 echoed this point, noting that consistent communication with families was also vital to reinforcing trust and academic success. Several participants stressed that these relationships extended beyond academics, addressing students’ social and emotional needs. P6 explained, “It is not just about what happens in the classroom. It

is about checking in with students and seeing how they feel emotionally; that is often the root of the problem.”

School culture and administrative support reinforce these relationships. For instance, P3 described how creating a climate of respect made a difference, noting, “Students needed to feel safe, not just physically, but emotionally and mentally as well.” P4 added that trust required time and consistency, particularly for students who had faced repeated disappointments, explaining that “you could not expect them to open immediately.” Participants also emphasized the importance of collaboration among teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders. P8 pointed out that administrators who actively engaged families and community leaders strengthened the overall support network, while P10 described how mentorship initiatives like “Becoming a Man” provided role models and fostered strong relational ties that helped keep students engaged in school. Overall, participants’ perspectives revealed that relational trust, consistent communication, supportive school climates, and collaborative structures were central to ensuring the academic success and retention of African American male students.

## **Theme 2: Holistic, Family, and Community-Based Support Systems for African American Male Students**

Participants consistently emphasized that family and community engagement were central to supporting African American male students’ academic success and reducing dropout rates. Effective collaboration between schools, families, and communities was described as requiring clear communication, culturally responsive practices, and consistent follow-up. For instance, P1 noted, “Once parents understood

what was happening at school, they were able to set up routines at home, and it made all the difference in their child's grades." This highlighted the broader perspective that families who were informed and engaged could significantly improve student outcomes.

Several participants stressed that holistic support must address challenges beyond academics. Social workers often collaborated with families and community partners to connect students with resources such as counseling, mentoring, and job readiness programs. As P2 explained, "It was not just about the classroom. We had to connect families to food, housing, or transportation resources before students could really focus on school." P8 echoed this view, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant programs that affirmed students' identities and made them feel valued in the school environment.

Many participants also highlighted the need to strengthen school-community partnerships. Mentorship programs led by local leaders and culturally responsive initiatives were frequently mentioned as vital support. P9 described partnering with grassroots organizations, noting, "When schools listen to what the community has to say, they are better equipped to meet the real needs of African American male students." P10 attributed faith-based institutions were also seen as important contributors, offering tutoring, mentoring, and consistent role modeling for students.

Trust and authenticity emerged as key components of family and community engagement. Several participants stressed the importance of open communication and transparency, with P4 noting, "Families wanted to be involved, but sometimes they didn't know how. Creating welcoming spaces was key". Others emphasized the importance of

consistency, with P7 stating that without regular contact, students sometimes felt their families had given up on them.

Overall, participants underscored that effective support for African American male students required coordinated, holistic systems that involved families, schools, and communities working together. By providing wraparound support, celebrating cultural identity, and fostering trust across all stakeholders, participants believed schools could sustain student motivation and promote long-term academic persistence.

### **Theme 3: Cultural Representation and Relevance in Education for African American Male Students**

The importance of cultural relevance in teaching strategies and curriculum content was consistent throughout the participants' discussions. A recurring point was that students needed to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, practices, and the school environment to feel valued and motivated. P1 stated, "When students can see themselves in the curriculum, it ignites a passion for learning." P2 explained "that including African American history, literature, and contributions in all subjects, not just during Black History Month, helped affirm students' identities and strengthen their connection to school." P7 stated, "When young Black boys see a teacher who looks like them and understands their journey, it can change how they view themselves and what they believe is possible." P4 added that "representation was equally important in leadership roles, as administrators set the tone for school culture and equity-focused policies."

Culturally responsive teaching practices were also viewed as essential. Participants described the value of embedding students' cultural experiences into lessons,

classroom discussions, and extracurricular activities. For example, P2 explained, “It is about weaving their culture into every subject, so they know it is part of the learning experience, not an afterthought.” Participant 8 shared that incorporating music, current events, and community-based examples made students feel recognized and encouraged them to engage more deeply in learning. Several participants tied cultural relevance to issues of equity and discipline. They argued that culturally responsive practices reduced misunderstandings and disciplinary disparities, while also building trust between students and staff. P4 explained, “When students see teachers who understand their culture and lived experience, it can reduce misunderstandings that often lead to harsh discipline.” P5 and 10 also added that “policies should actively support the recruitment and retention of African American male educators, including mentorship programs and professional development that help these teachers thrive in school systems that often leave them isolated.”

Finally, participants pointed out the systemic barriers that limited cultural responsiveness, particularly standardized curricula and testing pressures that constrained teacher autonomy. P10 stated, “If we want African American male students to thrive, we have to give educators the freedom to teach in ways that reflect who their students are.” Taken together, participants emphasized that cultural relevance in curriculum, teaching practices, and staffing was foundational to creating schools where African American male students felt affirmed, motivated, and empowered to succeed.

#### **Theme 4: Advocacy for African American Male Students**

Advocacy emerged as a central theme across participants' experiences, reflecting a shared understanding that African American male students often needed strong voices within schools and communities to ensure equitable opportunities for success.

Participants consistently emphasized that advocacy extended beyond offering individual support to addressing systemic barriers that disproportionately affected these students.

Several participants described advocacy as the responsibility to speak up when African American male students were overlooked, marginalized, or unfairly disciplined. For example, P1, "When no one else believed in these students, we had to step up and advocate for them". Others echoed this sentiment, recalling times when they pushed back against disciplinary actions that unfairly penalized students of color. As P2 explained, "I made sure my students were not unfairly stigmatized for behaviors that were often a result of circumstances beyond their control." These experiences underscored the importance of advocacy within schools to challenge bias and ensure fairness.

Participants also highlighted the systemic nature of advocacy, stressing that true change required more than intervening in individual cases. P3 stated, "Advocating for these students was not just about individual support; it was about changing the entire system to meet their needs." Others emphasized the role of educators as advocates beyond the classroom, pointing to community engagement and policy-level work as essential for dismantling inequities. For example, P4 said, "It was not enough to support students individually; we had to use our voices to influence broader change in the education system and society." Addressing implicit bias and systemic racism emerged as

another advocacy priority. P5 explained, “Part of advocacy was making sure the adults in the building were aware of their own biases and how those could impact the students.” This included pushing for institutional accountability, equity-focused training, and culturally responsive practices.

Collaboration was identified as a key feature of effective advocacy. Participants stressed that collective efforts among educators, families, and community organizations amplified the impact of advocacy. As P6 noted, “Advocacy was stronger when it was a collective effort”. Participants emphasized the importance of bringing students into these conversations, amplifying their voices in decision-making, and equipping them with self-advocacy skills, with P10 further noting, “It was not just about us speaking for them; it was about teaching them how to advocate for themselves.”

Participants P7, 8, and 9 also “described advocacy as securing resources such as mentorship programs, tutoring, and career-readiness initiatives that African American male students often lacked access to.” Taken together, participants framed advocacy as a multi-layered commitment, ranging from fighting for fair treatment and equitable resources, to influencing school policy, to empowering students with tools for self-advocacy. These efforts were seen as vital to advancing equity, reducing dropout rates, and promoting the long-term success of students.

### **Theme 5: Addressing Systemic Barriers and Educational Disparities for African American Male Students**

Barriers included lower expectations and inequitable disciplinary practices. Many participants pointed to discipline as a recurring obstacle. P1 noted, “I have seen many

students who are punished more harshly than their peers for the same behavior, just because of their race, which may increase the likelihood of them dropping out”. This highlighted the urgent need to address implicit bias and ensure fair treatment across schools. P4 reinforced this point, explaining, “When schools hold African American male students to lower standards or discipline them unfairly, it sends the message that they are not expected to succeed.”

Resource inequities also emerged as a critical concern. Several participants stressed that schools serving predominantly African American communities often lacked sufficient funding and support services. P2 stated, “Many schools are underfunded, and the available resources are insufficient to meet the needs of these students. We need to advocate for more funding and support services to help African American males succeed”. Others connected these inequities to broader systemic practices such as tracking, standardized testing, and labeling, which often reinforced disadvantages rather than fostering opportunity. As P3 explained, “There are so many barriers embedded in the system, from the way students are labeled to how their needs are not properly met.”

Participants also described how systemic issues were compounded by socioeconomic challenges. Students often faced poverty, unstable housing, or limited access to healthcare, which directly influenced their ability to focus and thrive academically. P5 observed, “These external factors deeply impact students’ ability to focus and perform in school.” When a student is worried about where they will sleep at night or whether there will be food at home, academics become secondary. It is hard for them to care about tests or assignments when their basic needs are unmet. P7 echoed this

concern, adding, “I had students who would come to school exhausted because they were taking care of younger siblings or dealing with unsafe neighborhoods. Without additional resources and community involvement, these challenges become invisible to the school, but they are real barriers to learning.”

The psychological toll of systemic inequities was another recurring theme. P7 stated, “When you are constantly met with suspicion or punishment, you start to believe that you do not belong.” Participants highlighted restorative practices, mental health supports, and culturally responsive approaches as essential to counter these messages and create affirming environments. Similarly, others criticized the reliance on zero-tolerance policies, which they believed funneled students into the criminal justice system rather than keeping them engaged in school. P8 noted, “We need to stop criminalizing behavior that stems from pain and start addressing the root causes.” Several participants stressed that without intentional efforts to build safe, supportive spaces, students internalized negative stereotypes and disengaged from learning. By shifting from punitive approaches to practices that affirm identity and address trauma, schools could foster resilience and help African American male students envision greater possibilities for themselves.

In addition, participants pointed to the role of educator preparation and accountability. Teachers, they argued, must be equipped to recognize structural racism and bias in their classrooms while implementing equitable practices. P9 stated, “Many teachers come into classrooms with good intentions but without the tools to effectively support African American male students.” P4 explained, “Collecting and analyzing this information shines a light on inequities that might otherwise go unaddressed.” Similarly,

P6 stressed that transparent reporting ensures schools cannot overlook patterns of bias, while P9 added that data-driven accountability helps educators implement more equitable practices. Together, these participants highlighted the need for schools to use evidence not only to identify disparities but also to drive systemic change. Finally, participants connected these systemic challenges to policymaking, stressing that decisions were often made without consulting the students and communities most affected. P10 stated, “Often, policies are written without consulting the people most affected. We need policymakers to sit with students, families, and educators, especially those in under-resourced communities. P10 concluded that true equity requires participatory approaches in policy reform, explaining, “If we are not at the table, the policies will never reflect our realities.” Taken together, the participants described systemic barriers as multifaceted and interrelated, spanning inequities in discipline, resources, expectations, and representation. By advocating for equitable resources and dismantling discriminatory practices, educators and policymakers could create school environments where these students were empowered to thrive.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the confidence that can be placed in the qualitative data collected (Nowell et al., 2017). I employed several strategies to ensure rigor. For example, I incorporated member checks to strengthen confidence in the accuracy of the data (Birt et al., 2016).

**Credibility**

Credibility was especially important for this study, as I focused on sensitive issues such as dropout and systemic barriers impacting African American male students. A reflexivity journal is used to enhance self-awareness (Nowell et al., 2017). I transcribed the interviews, conducted member checks, and maintained a reflexivity journal.

**Transferability**

I ensured transferability to show how strategies used by school social workers in one urban district could be applicable to similar districts. I compared the study's findings with prior research to identify patterns. Connecting themes with rich participant excerpts strengthens transferability and credibility.

**Dependability**

Dependability allows others to examine how data were collected, managed, and interpreted. I maintained documentation of the research process, data collection, coding, and theme development. This audit trail allows others to trace how findings were reached. Additionally, retired school social workers conducted an external review of the coding and thematic analysis. By combining an audit trail with external review, I ensured that the results accurately reflected participants' perspectives and could be verified by others.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability was crucial for ensuring that the findings represented participants' voices rather than research bias, especially given the sensitivity of discussing race, dropout, and systemic inequities. Participants' perspectives were reflected directly in the

findings through their own words and phrases. A reflexivity journal helped ensure that findings were grounded in participant data rather than researcher assumptions. No personal reactions were found.

### **Summary**

I analyzed interview transcripts and identified several key themes: building strong relationships, fostering family and community engagement, providing holistic support systems, advocating culturally relevant practices, and addressing systemic barriers. In addition, increasing representation through educators is a critical step toward closing achievement gaps and promoting equity. I present the implications for practice, policy, and future research, highlighting how these results contribute to efforts to improve retention and educational outcomes for African American male students.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore school social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies used to reduce the dropout rates of African American high school male students in an urban public school district in the Northern United States. I used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the conceptual framework to understand how school social workers perceived their roles, strategies, and systems of support in retaining African American male students. Ten school social workers participated in semistructured interviews, and the data were analyzed thematically. I present in this chapter the interpretation of the findings considering the literature and conceptual framework, discusses limitations of the study, and offers recommendations and implications for practice and future research.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The participants indicated, school social workers viewed student success and retention as dependent on multiple, interconnected factors. Five key themes emerged: the importance of relationship-based and school-based support structures, holistic family and community support systems, cultural representation and relevance in education, advocacy for African American male students, and efforts to address systemic barriers and educational disparities. Collectively, these findings suggest that reducing dropout rates requires more than academic interventions alone. Success depends on building trusting relationships, engaging families and communities, affirming students' cultural identities,

advocating for equity, and dismantling systemic barriers that disproportionately affect African American male students.

Family engagement strategies emerged as foundational elements of student success. Consistent communication, collaboration, and culturally relevant practices between schools and families-built trust and promoted active involvement in students' education. Participants described that keeping families informed about academic progress and challenges helped them establish supportive routines at home that reinforced learning and persistence. Strategies such as family nights, home visits, and invitations for families to participate in school events fostered inclusion and strengthened school-family partnerships. Moreover, acknowledging and affirming students' cultural identities through curriculum and school activities cultivated pride and ownership that extended to families. The importance of open, two-way communication that respects family voices remained central, as authentic engagement motivated both students and their families to stay invested in education.

Holistic support systems extended beyond academics to address the emotional, social, and practical needs that influence students' ability to succeed. Participants described coordinated efforts among educators, social workers, counselors, and community partners who provided services, such as resources, mentorship, and connections to food, housing, and safety supports. Culturally responsive practices ensured that support systems remained authentic and respectful of students' lived experiences. Mentorship from adults who shared similar cultural backgrounds offered important role modeling and empowerment. Addressing systemic barriers and supporting

the whole student, academically and personally, remained essential for sustaining engagement and achievement.

Participants emphasized the value of partnerships with local organizations, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, and grassroots groups that provided tutoring, mentorship, internships, and social services. Community mentors and elders served as positive role models who reinforced identity, pride, and resilience. Culturally responsive programming that celebrated African American history and heritage strengthened connections between students and their communities, fostering belonging and purpose. Collaboration among schools, families, and community entities ensured access to coordinated resources that aligned with students' needs. Participants emphasized that consistent, visible community engagement-built trust and reinforced a collective commitment to student success. These systems must address academic, emotional, social, familial, and cultural dimensions to empower students to thrive within and beyond school.

All participants emphasized the importance of building strong relationships and fostering trust, particularly with African American male students. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes the significance of the multiple contexts in which individuals live and develop and highlights how reciprocal relationships within these environments influence student outcomes (Guy-Evans, 2020; Khairul et al., 2023). Previous studies indicate that African American students face a disproportionate risk of dropping out and that supportive student-teacher relationships help mitigate this risk (Hensley, 2022; Leban & Masterson, 2022).

By collaborating with parents and teachers, social workers help engage families and address students' holistic needs (Phillippo & Crutchfield, 2021). They also reinforce the value of intentional teacher–student connections for students experiencing academic challenges (Pham et al., 2022). Participants' experiences aligned with these findings. P1 highlighted the critical role of forming personal relationships, noting that without trust, students felt unsupported: “Building relationships with the students is essential.” P2 emphasized that many African American male students experienced feelings of being overlooked or misunderstood, recalling, “One student was on the verge of dropping out, but after just a few check-ins and offering him a space to talk about his struggles, he turned things around.” Similarly, P3 explained that students “needed to feel safe, not just physically, but emotionally and mentally as well.” P4 added that trust often required patience because “sometimes, trust took time because these students had faced repeated disappointments.” P5 stressed the value of authenticity: “I have found that African American male students respected when you were straightforward and real with them.” P6 and P7 emphasized consistency and rapport, explaining, “If you showed up consistently and built rapport, they would start talking to you. It was all about relationship-building and check-ins.” Finally, P9 and P10 underscored that strong relationships were not only beneficial but pivotal in reducing dropout rates.

### **Theme 1: Teacher And Administrative Support**

Participants emphasized that a unified, intentional effort among school staff was necessary to maintain a supportive, high-expectation, and inclusive school climate. School leaders and educators influence academic outcomes and student well-being

(Gwathney, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory clarifies these dynamics by illustrating how interconnected environmental systems affect development. In particular, the chronosystem emphasizes the role of sustained administrative commitment over time in implementing equity-focused practices that shape school culture and student outcomes for African American male students (Crawford, 2020; Zorbaz & Özer, 2020). Within this framework, school social workers acted as connectors, facilitating collaboration among teachers, administrators, and families to reduce barriers and implement equitable practices (Beck & Hämäläinen, 2022).

Participants described how visible support and high expectations from teachers and administrators directly impacted students' success. P1 said, "The whole school needed to be on board to support African American male students". Similarly, P2 highlighted that high expectations from educators communicated belief in students' potential, while P3 added that "teacher expectations, combined with supportive administrative policies, created a foundation for student success."

Several participants stressed that equity must be demonstrated through leadership actions, not just words. P4 explained, "When administrators actively demonstrated commitment to equity and inclusion, it encouraged teachers to do the same." P5 echoed this by emphasizing accountability measures for staff, while P6 noted that teachers required adequate resources and support to effectively meet diverse student needs. P8 reinforced that trust from administrators empowered teachers, stating, "When

administrators showed they trusted teachers to make decisions that prioritized African American male students, it empowered everyone.”

Finally, P9 and P10 highlighted the importance of modeling accountability and using data-driven strategies. As P9 explained, “If leadership did not walk the talk on equity, teachers would not either.” P10 reinforced this by emphasizing the importance of identifying gaps and equipping educators with tools to address them, noting, “Administrators needed to identify where African American male students were struggling and then equip teachers with targeted strategies.” Overall, participants’ perspectives affirmed that when educators, administrators, and social workers acted collectively.

## **Theme 2: Holistic, Family, and Community-Based Support Systems for African American Male Students**

Participants consistently emphasized that family engagement was a strategy in supporting African American male students’ academic success and retention. Within Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, the family lies at the core of the microsystem, making it the most immediate and influential factor in shaping student outcomes (Khairul et al., 2023). When schools and families maintained positive, collaborative relationships, students benefited from consistent encouragement and accountability. These partnerships fostered stronger motivation and persistence by showing students that both educators and families were united in supporting their success.

School social workers help families address challenges that directly affected students' learning. Prior research also supports this role, noting that social workers enhance academic outcomes by addressing family-related barriers such as socioeconomic stress, absenteeism, or disengagement (Bates & Zhang, 2024; Beck & Hämäläinen, 2022; Kearney et al., 2023). Participants reinforced these insights, often recalling cases where family involvement made the difference between academic struggle and improvement. For example, P1 shared, "I had a student who was not submitting homework. Once we spoke with his parents and they understood the situation, they set up a routine at home to help him. It made all the difference in his grades." Similarly, P2 stressed that families must be able to influence and encourage students to remain in school.

Other participants described family engagement as a collaborative partnership. P3 emphasized that "when families were invested, students were more likely to succeed." P4 highlighted the value of involving families, while P5 and P6 pointed to ongoing dialogue and communication as ways to strengthen engagement. P7 focused on the practical role of families in ensuring attendance and punctuality, and P8 encouraged school-based opportunities, such as family visits, to build stronger connections. P9 highlighted the value of meeting families where they were, noting that building authentic relationships was key to sustaining engagement. P10 underscored that families supported students not only academically but also emotionally, reinforcing the idea that family presence created a safety net for persistence. Taking together, participants described family and community involvement as essential to establishing holistic support systems. By fostering

open communication, building trust, and addressing challenges that extend beyond the classroom, schools can create environments in which students feel supported.

### *Holistic Support Systems*

Participants emphasized the importance of holistic support systems in addressing the academic and personal needs of African American male students. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a useful lens for understanding this, as it highlights how family, school, and community systems intersect to shape student development and outcomes (Agostinelli et al., 2019; Crawford, 2020; Zorbaz & Özer, 2020). These overlapping influences can either support or hinder student success, underscoring the need for intentional, wraparound interventions.

Consistent with prior research, participants stressed that effective support must extend beyond academics to include students' emotional, social, and environmental needs (Harper & Smith, 2023; Robinson & Nichols, 2024). School social workers bridge connections between families, educators, and community organizations to provide resources (Bates & Zhang, 2024; Greenland & Moore, 2022; Phillippo & Crutchfield, 2021).

Participant reflections reinforced these insights with lived examples. One participant explained, "It is about looking at the whole student," emphasizing that addressing both academic and personal challenges was critical to long-term success. Others stressed that meeting students' emotional and social needs was as important as addressing academics. For example, one participant recalled implementing a school-wide

model that integrated counseling, tutoring, and mentorship opportunities, while another highlighted the value of embedding social-emotional learning into academic supports.

Issues such as poverty, community violence, and unstable housing often undermined students' ability to focus in the classroom. As P8 emphasized, "Our students need holistic support systems," capturing the shared belief that wraparound services are not optional but essential. Participants also stressed that behavioral challenges could not be addressed in isolation from broader life contexts, reinforcing the importance of coordinated approaches that consider the "whole child." Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that academic interventions alone are insufficient. Holistic support systems that integrate school, family, and community resources are necessary to address the barriers African American male students encounter.

### ***The Role of the Community***

Participants explained that when schools, families, and community organizations worked together, students were more likely to receive the support needed. As P2 stated, "We need to engage the community to offer resources like tutoring, after-school programs, and social services." The exosystem and macrosystem highlight the role of indirect settings and broader cultural norms in shaping student outcomes (Rosa & Tudge, 2020). While African American male students may not directly interact with local policies, community institutions, or cultural narratives, these forces create the conditions under which their educational experiences unfold.

School social workers were described as key facilitators in bridging these systems, connecting families with resources and coordinating with community partners to

provide wraparound supports (Bates & Zhang, 2024; Valero et al., 2021). Participants noted that strong community networks provided mentorship, academic encouragement, social services, and role models, echoing research showing that these partnerships foster trust, belonging, and persistence in school (Willis et al., 2021). Yet, participants also pointed to inequities in access, particularly the lack of extracurricular opportunities in underfunded schools, which Ladson-Billings (2021) identified as critical spaces for building confidence, identity, and college- and career-ready skills.

The testimonies of participants reinforced these findings. P1 explained, “These programs offer students opportunities to see success beyond the classroom,” referencing community mentorship and job-readiness initiatives. P2 stressed that no single educator could provide all the necessary support, noting, “We need to engage the community to offer resources like tutoring, after-school programs, and social services.” These perspectives highlight the importance of collaboration to extend learning beyond the school walls and connect it with real-world opportunities.

Several participants emphasized the transformative influence of community mentors and role models. P4 explained, “Having community leaders who actively engage with students can inspire them to envision different futures.” Others noted that faith-based groups and nonprofits played an important role in extending services, such as food assistance, counseling, and enrichment programs, which created a safety net for students and families. Community advocacy was also described as vital to influencing policy change and addressing structural inequities that disproportionately affected African American male students.

Importantly, participants connected community involvement with student voice and identity development. P6 described student-led community engagement to foster leadership and civic responsibility. P8 highlighted the importance of cultural representation, noting, “Having Black male teachers makes a difference. It gives the boys someone they can relate to on multiple levels.” Taken together, these findings suggest that community partnerships are not supplemental but central to educational equity for African American male students. When schools collaborate with families, nonprofits, mentors, and faith-based institutions, they create holistic support systems.

### **Theme 3: Cultural Representation and Relevance in Education for African American Male Students**

The importance of cultural relevance in teaching strategies and curriculum content emerged as a consistent theme throughout participants' discussions. Participants consistently emphasized the centrality of cultural representation and relevance in the academic success of African American male students. They described culturally relevant teaching not as an optional practice, but as a foundational approach to fostering engagement, motivation, and identity development. This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, particularly the macrosystem, which highlights how broader cultural values and beliefs shape students' experiences and perceptions of self within educational contexts (Crawford, 2020; Zorbaz & Özer, 2020). When African American male students experience a cultural disconnect, where their backgrounds and identities are not reflected in the curriculum or teaching practices, they are more likely to feel alienated and disengaged (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021).

Prior scholarship supports this finding. Hensley (2022) and Huxtable (2022) both emphasized that culturally responsive teaching and mentoring are essential for African American male students. Kearney et al. (2023) similarly highlighted that embedding cultural relevance into curriculum and pedagogy empowers students to connect more meaningfully with their education, and Murray et al. (2024) stressed how teacher expectations and school involvement directly influence students' academic pathways.

Participants described cultural relevance as a multidimensional practice that must extend across curriculum, pedagogy, extracurricular activities, and school culture. P1 explained, "When students can see themselves in the curriculum, it ignites a passion for learning." Others stressed that cultural inclusion should not be limited to token moments such as Black History Month or occasional lessons. Instead, these elements should be interwoven throughout all subjects and grade levels. This kind of intentional integration validated students lived experiences, built pride, and enhanced engagement. Participants also emphasized the role of culturally responsive classroom practices such as incorporating students' backgrounds into discussions and projects as key to building trust and strengthening educator-student relationships.

Representation within the teaching workforce was described as equally important. Multiple participants stressed the transformative impact of African American male educators. They argued that the presence of teachers who shared their students' identities not only provided cultural connection but also countered stereotypes and served as tangible role models of success. P1 emphasized, "When students see teachers who understand their culture and lived experiences, it reduces misunderstandings and builds

trust.” This aligns with Bristol’s (2021) work, which highlighted the power of diverse teacher representation.

Participants also discussed the systemic challenges that hinder culturally relevant practices, such as rigid curricular mandates and high stakes standardized testing. P4 noted, “If we want African American male students to thrive, we have to give educators the freedom to teach in ways that reflect who their students are.” This echoes research highlights the need for greater flexibility to implement pedagogy consistently and authentically. Overall, this study found that cultural representation and relevance are not supplemental supports but essential components of equitable education. Conversely, when cultural identities are absent or marginalized, students risk disengagement and alienation.

#### **Theme 4: Advocacy for African American Male Students**

The literature reflects similar concerns, with research showing that schools in predominantly African American communities face disproportionately high dropout rates (Matschke et al., 2023). Academic performance, student engagement, and systemic inequities are closely linked to persistence, highlighting how structural barriers influence students’ decisions to remain in or leave school (Barthelemy et al., 2022; Piscitello et al., 2022; Virtanen et al., 2021; Wallace, 2022; Warren, 2021). To address these challenges, educators and school social workers must take on active advocacy roles to create environments where students are supported.

Participants highlighted advocacy as essential to challenging inequitable systems, promoting fairness, and securing resources for African American male students. P1

emphasized the responsibility of educators to stand with students who might otherwise be overlooked, explaining, “When no one else believed in these students, we had to step up and advocate for them.” Similarly, P2 described advocacy within the school system as critical for ensuring fair treatment, particularly in disciplinary practices that often penalized African American males more harshly than their peers.

Several participants also stressed that advocacy required extending efforts beyond the classroom. P4 explained that advocacy must include partnerships with families, communities, and policymakers to dismantle inequities that directly affect African American male students. P5 described advocacy as confronting implicit bias and institutional racism, noting that awareness and accountability among staff were essential to ensure fair treatment. P6 reinforced this idea by presenting advocacy as a collective process, stating that collaboration among educators, families, and community stakeholders was necessary to secure meaningful change.

Other participants emphasized the role of advocacy in expanding access to resources and opportunities. P7 and P8 described how advocacy work often involved connecting students with external programs and services, such as mentoring, tutoring, or extracurricular opportunities, that extended support beyond academics. P9 explained, “Advocacy meant fighting for access to programs like mentorship, tutoring, and career readiness that these students often missed out on,” illustrating how systemic inequities limited student access to essential supports. Finally, P10 framed advocacy not only as a responsibility of educators and social workers but also as a tool for empowering students themselves. They emphasized the importance of teaching African American male

students to advocate for their own needs, thereby building agency and resilience in navigating systemic barriers. These findings highlight advocacy as a multi-layered practice that operates at the individual, institutional, and community levels. Advocacy work by educators and social workers is not only about providing immediate support but also about challenging systemic inequities.

### **Theme 5: Addressing Systemic Barriers and Educational Disparities for African American Male Students**

Lowered expectations, disproportionate disciplinary practices, and unequal access to academic resources were repeatedly described as obstacles that hinder students' opportunities for success. The collective discussion made clear that these barriers are structural rather than individual, requiring intentional reform at the school, district, and policy levels to ensure equity. Literature supports these insights. African American male students continue to drop out at higher rates than their peers, often due to systemic inequities such as cultural disconnects, exclusionary discipline, and underfunded schools (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021). These disparities are not only educational but also social, as students who leave school prematurely face increased risks of unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, and higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system (Hensley, 2022). Huguley et al. (2021) and Warren (2021) highlighted how African American students, though representing only 15% of the population, account for a disproportionate share of law enforcement referrals and school-based arrests. Such disparities reflect broader systemic bias that undermines student success. Moreover, the societal cost of inequitable practices, including legal expenses, incarceration, and lost

economic productivity, reinforces the need for interventions that promote equity in schools (Maylor et al., 2021; Sasaki & Baba, 2024).

Participants offered numerous examples that brought these systemic barriers into focus. P1 described how African American male students were disciplined, “This leads to suspensions, which only increase the likelihood of them dropping out.” P2 drew attention to inequitable resource allocation. P3 emphasized the embedded bias within policies on testing, tracking, and discipline, stating, “It is about creating a system that sees the potential in these students, not just their challenges.” Similarly, P4 stressed the importance of data transparency, arguing that collecting and analyzing information on student performance and discipline can hold schools accountable for inequitable outcomes.

Other participants focused on the broader social and psychological effects of systemic inequities. P5 highlighted how poverty, housing instability, and limited healthcare access compound educational challenges, calling for community-school partnerships that deliver wraparound support. P6 emphasized including student voice in reform efforts, explaining that sustainable solutions require input from those most affected. P7 described the emotional toll of systemic bias, advocating restorative practices and culturally affirming mental health supports. P8 critiqued zero-tolerance policies, stating, “We need to stop criminalizing behavior that stems from pain,” and encouraged trauma-informed approaches to discipline.

Teacher preparation and policy development were also identified as key areas needing reform. P9 noted that many educators enter classrooms without adequate

training. P10 described the disconnect between policy decisions and lived experiences, stating, “Policies are written without consulting the people most affected by them,” and called for participatory approaches that center the voices of students, families, and frontline educators.

Taken together, these perspectives and the supporting literature reinforce the conclusion that addressing systemic barriers requires comprehensive and sustained reform. Equitable funding, culturally responsive practices, restorative approaches to discipline, and inclusive policy development are essential steps toward dismantling disparities. By confronting these structural inequities, schools can create environments where students are empowered to achieve long-term personal growth.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the sample size included only 10 school social workers from the research site, which may limit the transferability and generalizability of the findings to other contexts, school districts, or geographic areas with different demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Second, the reliance on self-reported data collected through interviews introduces the potential for personal bias, selective recall, and social desirability effects, as participants may have emphasized specific experiences or viewpoints while omitting others. Third, including diverse perspectives could reveal additional factors influencing educational outcomes. Fourth, time constraints and challenges in participant recruitment during the academic calendar. Lastly, qualitative design, while rich in detail, prevents causal conclusions and indicates the need for complementary quantitative research to validate and expand these findings.

## Recommendations

First, school districts should prioritize recruitment and retention strategies to increase the number of school social workers. Research indicates that diverse teacher representation enhances academic engagement, socio-emotional development, and student persistence (Bristol, 2021). Similarly, sustained engagement from families and community stakeholders is essential in promoting student retention and achievement (Robinson & Nichols, 2024). Second, training strengthens staff responsiveness to students lived experiences and fosters inclusive school climates (Greenland & Moore, 2022; Kelly et al., 2021). Professional development emphasizing emotional intelligence and communication skills further enables teachers to cultivate stronger, empathetic connections with students (Harper & Smith, 2023).

Third, comprehensive student support must extend beyond academics. Schools should form partnerships with community-based organizations (Connors et al., 2021; Robinson & Nichols, 2024). Social workers and educators should adopt relationship-centered practices, such as mentoring, peer leadership opportunities, and visible presence in informal student spaces. Positive adult-student relationships have been shown to buffer against adverse experiences and enhance school connectedness, which is linked to improved achievement and reduced discipline referrals (Khairul et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2024).

Fourth, policy reforms must address exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately impact African American male students. Eliminating zero-tolerance approaches and implementing restorative justice and trauma-informed interventions can

improve school climate and reduce suspensions (Killen & Rutland, 2022; Maylor et al., 2021). Additionally, districts should institutionalize equity audits by collecting and reporting data on discipline, academic tracking, and access to advanced coursework to ensure transparency and accountability (Barthelemy et al., 2022; Virtanen et al., 2021).

Finally, participatory action research models that engage students and parents as co-researchers ensure that interventions are culturally relevant and contextually grounded (Kearney et al., 2023). Policymakers should incorporate these perspectives when developing reforms to ensure equitable outcomes and sustainable solutions. Together, these recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for dismantling systemic barriers, empowering students.

### **Implications**

There is a need for systemic transformation, cultural responsiveness, and sustained collaboration among educators, administrators, families, and communities. School social workers play a critical role as relational anchors and cultural brokers, offering individualized, trauma-informed support that addresses barriers to academic success. Evidence demonstrates that mentorship initiatives, family engagement, and culturally responsive practices increase student engagement, retention, and graduation rates (Harper & Smith, 2023; Robinson & Nichols, 2024; Willis et al., 2021). Research further affirms that African American male students thrive in school climates characterized by high expectations, equitable opportunities, and consistent relational support (Bristol, 2021; Khairul et al., 2023). A collective commitment across educators,

school leaders, and social workers is therefore essential to fostering inclusive environments where students can succeed.

At the district and state levels, educational policies must explicitly reflect commitments to equity and racial justice. Revising disciplinary codes to eliminate disproportionate punishment and reduce reliance on exclusionary practices is critical to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. Prior studies have shown that greater representation strengthens student outcomes, improves school climate, and counters harmful stereotypes (Bristol, 2021; Goings et al., 2020). Ultimately, lasting progress depends on consistent accountability, and the collective will of policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure equity becomes a lived reality rather than just an aspiration.

Future research should expand participant demographics to include a wider range of geographic locations, educational roles, and stakeholder perspectives, particularly those of students and families. Including student voices will provide critical insights into lived experiences and strengthen the contextual validity of dropout prevention strategies (Kearney et al., 2023). In addition, multi-site studies could identify context-specific challenges and effective practices, allowing interventions to be adapted to diverse school settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Key themes emerged around culturally responsive practices, relationship-building, and trauma-informed interventions as essential components for fostering student engagement and reducing dropout rates. Participants stressed the importance of authentic connections, mentorship, and wraparound services that address the multifaceted

challenges students face inside and outside school. I identified limitations in current educational systems and policies, inequitable disciplinary practices, and insufficient resources for mental health and community partnership initiatives. I call for systemic changes through inclusive hiring, culturally competent professional development, and policies that prioritize equity and student voice.

The implications for practice emphasize that social workers must act as empowered advocates and leaders within schools, equipped with ongoing training and autonomy to tailor interventions to student needs. At the policy level, reforms must address structural inequities and resource allocation, while research should incorporate diverse perspectives and rigorous evaluation of intervention outcomes. These insights outline a pathway to create educational environments where students receive holistic support. School social workers, educators, administrators, and policymakers must unite to dismantle inequities and rebuild structures that affirm every student's potential, dignity, and worth. Schools must nurture resilience, foster belonging, and offer equitable opportunities to uphold this moral obligation.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

 Demographic Information:

1. What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

White \_\_\_\_\_  
 Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin \_\_\_\_\_  
 Black or African American \_\_\_\_\_  
 Asian \_\_\_\_\_  
 Native American or Alaskan Native \_\_\_\_\_  
 Hawaiian Native or other Pacific Islander \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender identity?

Man \_\_\_\_\_  
 Woman \_\_\_\_\_  
 Another gender identity, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
 I prefer not to respond \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your highest level of education?

High school diploma/GED \_\_\_\_\_  
 Associate's degree \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bachelor's degree \_\_\_\_\_  
 Master's degree \_\_\_\_\_  
 Doctoral degree \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your current employment status? (Employed full-time, Employed part-time, Unemployed, Student, Retired, Other)

5. How many years have you worked as a School Social Worker?

 Perceptions of Dropout Rates:

- What do you believe are the main factors contributing to the high dropout rates among African American males in high school?
- How do you see these factors differing from those affecting other student demographics?

 Effective Strategies:

- In your experience, what strategies have been most effective in reducing dropout rates among African American males?
- Can you provide specific examples of programs or interventions that have shown success?

School and Community Support:

- How do school policies and the broader school environment impact dropout rates for African American males?
- What role do community resources and partnerships play in supporting these students?

Challenges and Barriers:

- What challenges do you face when implementing dropout prevention strategies for African American male students?
- How do these challenges impact the effectiveness of your interventions?

Cultural Relevance:

- How important is cultural relevance in the strategies used to support African American males in high school?
- Can you share any culturally specific approaches that have been particularly effective?

Engagement and Motivation:

- What techniques have you found effective in increasing engagement and motivation among African American male students?
- How do you involve students in the development and implementation of strategies to reduce dropout rates?

Family and Peer Involvement:

- How do family dynamics and peer relationships influence dropout rates among African American males?
- What strategies do you use to involve families and peers in supporting students' education?

Evaluation and Outcomes:

- How do you measure the success of the strategies implemented to reduce dropout rates?

- Can you share any data or outcomes that highlight the effectiveness of these strategies?

Recommendations:

- Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make for other school social workers or educators looking to reduce dropout rates among African American males?
- Are there any new or emerging strategies you believe hold promise for addressing this issue?

Personal Insights:

- How has your perspective on dropout prevention evolved over the course of your career?
- What personal experiences or insights have most influenced your approach to supporting African American male students?

Future Directions:

- What do you see as the future directions for research and practice in reducing dropout rates among African American males?
- How can schools and communities better support the long-term success of these students?