



**SELINUS UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCES AND LITERATURE

**TO BE SEEN AND HEARD: STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT  
THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES  
IN NORTHERN CHICAGO HIGH SCHOOLS**

By Christopher Michael Spence

**A DISSERTATION**

Presented to the Department of  
Education  
program at Selinus University

Faculty of Arts & Humanities  
in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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## Abstract

The underachievement of African Americans, particularly African-American males, is one of the most troubling issues in education (Cokley et al., 2012; Schott Foundation, 2018). A significant population of African-American males has struggled to find their place in society (Wilson, 2014). Recent data shows 78% of African American students are completing high school in Chicago, Illinois (Casey Foundation, 2021). While the number of African American students who have graduated has risen in the last five years, African American males have not kept pace with African American female students and peers from different racial groups (Pearman et al., 2019). This study examined strategies that support the achievement of African American males in Northern Chicago high schools. The researcher gathered data through interviews with recent African American male graduates or seniors over the age of 18 who could explain personal experiences and strategies that impacted their academic success. Data were analyzed using open coding. Patterns and themes such as racial identity and support systems were identified as part of the data analysis process. Critical race theory (CRT) is the guiding theoretical framework used in examining the conceptualization of race and racism's role in educational systems, practices, and outcomes. The results from this study can provide further and deeper understanding on strategies that may improve the educational attainment of African American males in northern Chicago high schools. Based on the findings, strategies identified in the study, used by African American males, other students of different ethnic groups, educational practitioners, researchers, parents, policymakers, and community leaders may bring positive social change to continue increasing graduation rates in northern Chicago schools.

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Dedication

Marcia Monique Miller Spence

June 25, 1966-March 26, 2020

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Thank you to my family and friends for your love and support!

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## Chapter 1: Foundation of the Study

### **Introduction**

The educational attainment of African American males are a concern at the local, state, and national levels, as Black males continue to lag behind the national graduation average (Franklin, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). A contributing factor to this concern is the percentage of Black male students expelled from school; Black male students are expelled more frequently (at 6%) than Hispanic male students (at 2%) and white male students (at 2.6%) (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Black students are disciplined more severely and more frequently than other racial or ethnic groups, leading to more out-of-school time (Dumas & Nelson, 2017; Marchbanks et al., 2018). Recent data have shown that 78% of African American students complete high school in Chicago, Illinois (Annie, 2020). Although African American students' high school completion has risen in the last five years, they continue to lag behind African American female peers and other students from different racial groups (Bowman et al., 2018; Pearman et al., 2019). Through this research, the researcher examined the strategies that contribute to the academic achievement of African American males in northern Chicago high schools.

### **Background of the Problem**

The continuing underachievement of African American males is troubling, as it has dire social and educational consequences (Franklin, 2018). Underachievement refers to educational outcomes, wherein Black male students' national graduation rates lag behind their peers (Franklin, 2018). It is noteworthy that targeted interventions are implemented to address the achievement crisis rampant amongst a minority —African American male high school students (Franklin, 2018; Reardon et al., 2019). Through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; 1965) and its intent through reauthorizations, policymakers have continuously sought to

introduce accountability structures that focus on improving student achievement for these student populations.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was introduced in 2002 due to concerns about the growing achievement gaps of minority students, which resulted in improved test scores for minority students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was authorized in 2015 to help more minority students meet higher graduation standards. The ESSA has resulted in minority gains in graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The adverse life circumstances faced by African American young men have been well-established over time. As research and public discourse continue to highlight the troubling life events for African American males, the need to address and respond to the narrative many African American males face is critically important (Austin, 2018). The results of the study may provide insights to an area that needs further examination. The number of studies investigating strategies to improve African American male academic achievement from students' perspectives is limited (Dixson, 2017). By focusing on this issue from the standpoint of recent African American male high school graduates, the identification of possible strategies and solutions for increasing African American male achievement could help increase graduation rates for students from other ethnic backgrounds.

### **Problem Statement**

Recent data have shown that 78% of African American students are completing high school in Chicago, Illinois (Annie, 2020). While the number of African American students who have graduated has risen in the last five years, African American males are not graduating at the same rate as their female peers and/or students from different racial groups (Pearman et al.,

2019). In 2019, Black males' 5-year graduation rate was 65.4%, compared to 81.2% for Black females (Kempf, 2020). African American males are less likely to graduate from high school, continue their education, and graduate from college or trade schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The general educational leadership and administration problem is that, while graduation rates have increased in the last five years for all ethnic groups of students in Chicago, African American graduation rates are below those of other ethnic groups (Annie, 2020). The specific educational leadership problem is that African American males in northern Chicago graduation rates are lagging behind other racial groups (Pearman et al., 2019). Identifying strategies that have caused or encouraged an increase in graduations during the last five years could help continue the trend of increased graduation rates for African American males in northern Chicago schools.

### **Purpose Statement**

Through this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher sought to identify strategies that supported the academic attainment of African American male high school students. The target population for this study includes recent African American male graduates from northern Chicago high schools. The study's geographic site is northern Chicago. Chicago schools' 5-year graduation rates have risen for all ethnic groups (Annie, 2020). While this rise is a positive sign for all Chicago-area students, African American male graduation rates must be tracked simultaneously (Koumpilova, 2021). Kempf (2020) posited that these results are due to the deficit perspective and portrayals of Black males in media and society. The study may contribute to social change by providing research-based strategies that African American males can utilize to succeed in their college studies. Ultimately, this will foster positive social change because

academic success for African American male students will help them contribute towards economic and social development of African American families and communities.

### **Nature of the Study**

The researcher of this study used a qualitative method to discover the strategies that supported the academic success of African American males. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) suggest the following steps: (a) identify a research problem, (b) review the literature, (c) specify a purpose for research, (d) collect data, (e) analyze and interpret the data, and (f) report and evaluate the research. Crossman (2020) indicates that the most important reason for using qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of experiences.

In addition to the qualitative methodology, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe two other research methods —the quantitative method and the mixed method, neither of which is a right fit for this study, as the intent of the research was not to test a theory using narrow hypotheses. Therefore, based on this study's research objectives, the mixed and quantitative approaches are not feasible, as the process and purpose of the research determine the design required for successful research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Qualitative research delves into how people understand their experiences, and bring meaning and awareness to their world (Bansal et al., 2018). Furthermore, it aims to understand and analyze how people make sense of, engage in, and grapple with the world around them. Qualitative research can also contribute to the formation of public policy and inform resource allocation decisions of organizations (Bansal et al., 2018). Quantitative analysis tends to be more fixed, while qualitative data are excellent for insights and open-ended analysis and conclusions. The current study was best served through qualitative data from interviews, from which the researcher was able to explore and identify strategies utilized by African American male

graduates. Quantitative research was not chosen for this study because the issues explored were more than numerical, focusing on methods used for academic success. Neither was a mixed-methods study selected because the quantitative aspect was not the target of the study.

The phenomenological design is the best research design for this study because phenomenological research allows for exploring the participants' perceptions and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The phenomenon of interest in this study is the exploration of the experiences and strategies that contributed to African American males' success.

### **Research Question**

Research questions are at the core of a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The study followed the guidelines for conducting a phenomenological study related to the strategies used by African American males that contribute to their academic success. The research question enabled the researcher to obtain data regarding the participants' individual schooling experiences that contribute to their academic success. The goal was to explore the strategies that contribute to their academic success, so that other subgroups of learners may benefit from the process. This study was guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What strategies contribute to the academic success of African American male students in northern Chicago schools?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) is the framework for exploring the conceptualization of race and racism's role in educational systems, practices, and outcomes (Brown, 2018). It is foundational to how African American males view education. Ladson-Billings (2018) has suggested that CRT is a lens that enables discourse about race, class, and gender to be the

centerpiece for analyzing African American male underachievement. Ladson-Billings (2018) argued that CRT in education aims to interrupt the discrimination cycle that hinders Black students' progress. There is evidence supporting the connections between the public school system's disciplinary practices and restrictive culture and the prison system focusing more on criminalization than education and rehabilitation (Irby, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2018). The researcher intended to identify strategies that helped overcome barriers to graduation of African American males, including pervasive racial disparities that exist in northern Chicago high schools (Koumpilova, 2021).

CRT holds that race is a feigned correlation between a set of physical attributes that include skin color as well as a set of psychological and behavioral tendencies devised as constructive or adverse (Baber, 2016). From such a perspective, the theory proves useful in identifying and assessing the positive psychological and behavioral strategies utilized by African American male students to advance their chances of improved educational attainment. According to Taylor (2019), these connections have been generated by dominant groups in the United States to sustain their superiority of other groups. Accordingly, this theory helped the current researcher evaluate the efficiency of the blueprint used by African American males to improve their possibilities of academic success amidst the challenges of racial oppression, imposed inferiority, and exploitation.

CRT is a compilation of several theories, fostered through scholarship and activism (Baber, 2016). As defined by Taylor (2019), CRT focuses on studies pertaining to race, racism, and power. CRT is differentiated from the traditional civil rights movement in that it questions the foundations of legal interpretation, liberal disposition, and equity theory. Critical race theory has often been used to examine the relationship between race and education systems,

given that it treats race as a social construct (Hiraldo, 2010). Thus, it is useful to evaluate strategies that have previously been used by African American male students through the lens provided by CRT to understand how such strategies contributed to their academic success.

CRT identifies several reasons that can be associated with the experiential strategies of African American male students. The chief reason is that America was built for elite white men, and those laws and intentions continue to permeate behaviors, structures, and intentions (Milner IV, 2008). As such, CRT proves the most suitable framework in evaluating the strategies utilized by African American male students, considering the racialized inclinations with which institutions and learning environments are permeated. Additionally, CRT provides the appropriate platform for the current study. In line with this perspective, Baber (2016) indicates that the theory not only provides diverse viewpoints for looking at oppressed factions in society, but also incorporates the component of lived experiences to help unearth survival and coping strategies utilized by minority factions.

CRT uses the voice and expertise of people of color to highlight the impact of the teacher belief system on the educational attainment and engagement of African American males (Capper, 2015). CRT advocates using narrative and counter stories to identify and interrupt racist school practices (Taylor, 2019). The participants' insights regarding the strategies which contributed to their academic success did provide rich meaning to this study (Hiraldo, 2010).

### **Operational Definitions**

In this section, the researcher provides operational definitions of several commonly used terms to avoid the possibility of misinterpretation.

*Academic achievement:* Appraisals of the value of students' present, future, and past educational outcomes of success or failure (Putwain et al., 2021).

*African American or Black:* American individuals who identify as African based on ethnicity, race, or heritage (Smith et al., 2019).

*Institutional racism:* Patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of a racial minority group (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

*Microaggression:* Subtle, everyday covert behaviors that cause marginalized people to feel more oppressed (Applebaum, 2019).

*Motivation:* An action that begins, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors (Cherry, 2020).

*Poverty:* Economic conditions experienced by African American households with income below the federal poverty line (i.e., under \$25,000 per year; Alfieri, 2019).

*Prejudice:* Positive or negative views or feeling about an individual or social identity group, typically formed without knowledge, based on a single event, and then transferred to all possible experiences (O'Shea et al., 2020).

*Racial equity:* Racially equitable systems in which racially diverse perspectives are equally embedded in power structures, policy-making processes, and the cultural fabric of institutions (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

*School-to-prison pipeline:* The phenomenon in which schools criminalize minor infractions, which results in student exposure to the criminal justice system (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018).



*Self-efficacy*: One's belief in their ability to achieve the desired goal or attain designated types of performances (Artino et al., 2012).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

The study was guided by beliefs suitable for research (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Study limitations allude to facets of the research that are outside of the researcher's charge and prevent the study findings from being applied to other settings (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations are options made by the researcher that establish limits on the study when the survey is conducted, specifying the reasons that some research tasks will not be performed (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are a valid starting point for a research study but have not yet been confirmed (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher of this study assumed that African American males faced challenges that affected their educational attainment and that some participants did not overcome these barriers. Additionally, the researcher assumed that mutual trust and rapport would be developed with study participants. Finally, the researcher assumed that the participants selected to participate in the study would be forthright and sincere sharing experiences to support their interview responses.

#### **Limitations**

A study's limitations are weaknesses (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Because of the study's slight sample size, the findings may not be generalizable to other high school students. The study was limited to individuals' perceived experiences that contributed to their academic attainment. An additional limitation is the geographic location of northern Chicago, Illinois. The findings may not be generalized to other high schools within the Chicago area.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations are parameters placed on the study by the researcher over which the researcher does have a degree of control, such as the boundary and scope of the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Editage Insights, 2020). A delimitation to this study was that this research was restricted to recent African American male graduates in northern Chicago, Illinois. Another delimitation was that the subjects selected were males, focusing on one gender and not including the perspectives of their female counterparts.

The study was delimited to African American males aged 18–20 years old who have recently graduated and are currently receiving mentoring from a community hub where students access program support and services.

## **Justification of the Study**

The results from the study could provide further insights in to the ability of young Black males to change their academic outcomes (Dixson, 2017; Linwood et al., 2020). This may also help African American males and other racialized students succeed (Bush & Bush, 2020; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2017). Recommendations from the present study could significantly impact the academic outcomes of African American males in northern Chicago and deepen the understanding of interventions that support African American youth (Kempf, 2020) overall. Furthermore, the discovery of insights could influence the allocation of resources to support the academic outcomes of young Black males (Nelson, 2017; Robinson, 2017). It is possible that the strategies utilized by successful African American males can be identified and used to reframe young African American males' perceptions of their life outcomes (Kumah-Abiwu, 2019; Robinson, 2017). The sense of academic accomplishment may inspire other young African American males to follow in their footsteps. African American males who have been successful

in their educational goals will have a voice to inspire other students with a similar demographic profile. The heightened awareness of themselves and their learning mode could be passed on to students who might otherwise not have considered this personalized approach. As a result, the findings of the present study may provide particulars on African American males' insights, as well as focus on what contributed to their academic success (Dixson, 2017; Robinson, 2017). This research could also positively impact the rebuilding of the African American community within an urban environment (Robinson, 2017; Rodriguez & Greer, 2017; Warren, 2016).

The present study is notable because young African American men, struggle to achieve full affiliation and merit in U.S. society (Fries-Britt, 2017). While research chronicles students' experience in general, including improving graduation rates, further research is required to amplify the voice of African American males and what strategies, from their perspective, worked in their journey to high school graduation (Etlén, 2017). The African American male achievement gap has implications that extend far beyond the classroom. Academic outcomes among African American students are associated with several long-term social and economic consequences, such as higher rates of poverty, unemployment, increased crime, greater dependence on social welfare systems, and lower tax revenues (Chetty et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). The academic achievement gap presents a sobering account of the modern education system, and greater urgency of outcomes is needed to close it. Exploring and understanding the strategies utilized by recent African American graduates may be instrumental in guiding school improvement efforts where African American male students underperform (Gubbels et al., 2019; Loury, 2019).

The present study may serve as an alternate voice to the bleak present day representation of African American males. Unlike the academic performance of some Black male students there

are those Black males who have triumphed notwithstanding the obstacles they face. The experiences learned from their journey can help rescue those struggling academically or who have been pushed out of the system. Addressing the relentless barrage of stereotypes that negatively impact African American male students' social identity and self-esteem may help solve that aspect of the achievement gap. Recent graduates' success can be used to deepen their understanding of this complex issue.

The concept of the Black male achievement gap is not new to education. Despite increasing demands for and changes aimed at equity, years of research into the origins of the Black male achievement gap, and modern educational theories that espouse success for all students, current data continue to show disparities between Black male students' achievement levels and the achievement levels of their peers in all other racial and gender categories. The researcher of this study acknowledges that the historical context of slavery continues to impact this situation, which can be linked to the transatlantic slave trade (Alfieri, 2019). During the Civil War era, the education of enslaved Black people was against the law, while racially segregated schools were the law under Jim Crow laws. The Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) established separate public schools for Black and White students (Alfieri, 2019; Bishop, 1977). The decision also negated African American children of educational equity. "Coloured" schools had to make do with limited financial support and minimal resources.

Therefore, part of the rationale for this study was to find out why the underachievement of African American males has continued to exist and persist, despite immense measures to name it and correct it. Racial disparities in educational outcomes have continued since the integration of all U.S. schools in 1954 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). The accountability of Black and White students' performance were the same since the *Brown v.*

*Board of Education* (1954) U.S. Supreme Court decision. Regrettably, the gap has widened because other factors inside and outside the school hinder Black male academic performance progress (Brown, 2018). Researchers must find, uncover and understand those factors as they relate to African American males.

Additionally, exploring the strategies used by recent graduates in their pursuit of success may be illuminating. This study provides an opportunity to continue efforts to achieve educational equity for all learners. Regardless of the quality and effectiveness of school leaders and teachers, the background of students, the self-assurance, and the school's climate of expectations contribute to the achievement gap and remains a topic of constant debate. Educators, researchers, and policymakers must continue developing and implementing strategies to support Black male students in improved academic outcomes.

The present study acknowledges that race and gender continue to impede the academic progress of Black males. The goal is to highlight greater understanding of their assets, agency, and acumen, and calls for researchers and practitioners to banish the deficit-based narratives which continue to persist within U.S. society about African American males. The spotlight on African American males' brilliance, strengths, and life possibilities is amplified. The researcher acknowledges the size and pervasiveness of the Black male achievement gap, under which Black males lag in almost all aspects of education (Duncan, 2021; Franklin, 2018; Griffin et al., 2017; Lynch, 2017). Thus, it becomes essential to examine the social challenges that Black males face and that may diminish their motivation and self-esteem. The present study may provide strategies that can be shared with other students, teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, and community leaders to assist future African American male students in reaching the goal of high school graduation.

### **Transition and Summary**

The first section identified the research design and method as a qualitative phenomenological study. The participants were identified as recent African American male graduates aged 18–20 years old. The researcher explored the strategies that contribute to the educational attainment of African American males. The study addressed African American students' persistent academic achievement gap (Hung et al., 2020; Pearman et al., 2019).

The poor academic performance between African American male high school students and their peers is a cause for concern that permeates public high schools across the nation. This problem, which is now more pervasive than ever, is one that the current researcher sought to address through this study. The achievement gap has often included a lack of motivation, low expectations, lack of family support and peer pressure among African American males (Pruitt et al., 2019). Researchers have indicated that African American students are more apt than their White peers than to be taught by less qualified teachers, have fewer academically successful peers, and attend schools with fewer resources (Brown, 2018). African American students often attend schools with many impoverished students (Calhoun & Tejada, 2018). Accordingly, the researcher explored how the insights of successful African American male students may contribute to improved graduation rates overall.

## Chapter 2: A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach to explore strategies contributing to the academic success of recent African American male graduates in northern Chicago High Schools. There is an urgent need for further research on the methods used by African American males to improve academic outcomes. The findings of this study include strategies to help more African American males and other subgroups graduate from high school by focusing on this population. The foundational purpose of this study is to use research to promote equity within education systems.

Figure 1  
*Graduation rate for Black boys in Chicago*

Year	Black
2013	47
2014	50
2015	53
2016	57
2017	62
2018	65

Figure 2  
*Chicago high school graduation rates*

Year	All	White	Hispanic	Black
2011	58	67	60.4	51
2012	59.7	69	63	53
2013	63	71	67	57
2014	66.5	75	70.8	60
2015	70	78.5	75	62
2016	73.5	81	78	66
2017	77.8	89.1	80.3	71

2018	78.2	86.2	81.6	71.8
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This chapter begins with a presentation of the conceptual framework based on critical race theory (CRT), followed by an exploration of literature drawn from peer-reviewed journals. CRT has become a mainstay in the playbook of education researchers seeking to analyze the racial disparities in academic outcomes of people of color critically, looking to this theory's foundational legal scholarship and ethnic studies, as well as the trailblazing work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solórzano (1997), who introduced the analysis of CRT to education. Through a qualitative approach, the researcher aims to capture the young men's interpretations of strategies that contributed to their academic success. The current study may provide valuable insights from the voices of African American males to improve graduation rates.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2018), a literature review is instrumental in determining which issues require further study. The literature review also illuminates underlying factors which contribute to the achievement of African American male students. The publications for this literature review were gathered through University educational databases, SAGE, ProQuest, EBSCO, O'Reilly, JoVE, Pub Med, America's News, and ProQuest-Black. Scholarly journals were searched with keywords such as African American males, closing the achievement gap, equity and education, and racial disparities.



**Table 1***Audit of References Used in the Doctoral Study Literature Review*

Source	2016 and Earlier	% of Total	2017 to Present	% of Total	Total Sources	% of total
Peer-reviewed articles	15	75	137	72.9%	152	73.1%
Government websites	3	15	27	14.4%	30	14.4 %
Books	2	10	17	9.04%	19	9.1%
Dissertations	0	0	7	3.7%	7	3.3 %
Total Sources	20	100	188	100%	208	100%

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework applied to this study is CRT, which is a body of work that focuses on the exploration of the correlation between race, structural racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Irby, 2017). Furthermore, CRT responded to the need for critical legal studies to address the effects of race and racism in law, and eventually evolved to address multiple disciplines, including education. CRT maintains that race and racism are leading structures in American society and give credence to the historical roots of racism in education and the modern-day challenges students of color face in schools by giving voice to their experiences and thus, challenging the dominant narrative. Additionally, CRT offers educators a way to deconstruct educational attainment for students of color (Brown, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT highlights the education and legal systems as the primary culprits for African American males' continued discrimination in schools. Bonilla-Silva (2019) explains that White privilege and institutional racism in the United States have transformed from an overt and explicit process into a provocative and subtle—yet fundamentally intact—process, which may be perpetuated through low expectations. Racial disparities in educational outcomes continue to exist and are pervasive (Nelson, 2017).

CRT seeks to illuminate the voices of historically silenced individuals and provide an alternative to mainstream accounts of their realities of being marginalized (Brown, 2018). Therefore, their stories, histories, and experiences are heard. The study may gain critical insights from the stories and experiences of African American males, which will deepen one's understanding of the complexity of their life experiences. These insights might lead to purposeful interventions to enhance the conditions of oppressed people (Sandals, 2020). Furthermore, the CRT framework is critically important to this review to explore the historical and modern-day oppressive conditions that have impacted African American males. Of particular significance is the refusal of CRT to use "cultural-deficit paradigms" to understand the racial disparities in the achievement gaps. CRT further understands the past and present conditions that have created socioeconomic disparities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Accordingly, this study seeks to identify strategies that advanced the educational attainment of African American males through the lens of CRT.

Christian et al. (2019) use CRT as a conceptual framework to emphasize narrative storytelling, and understand racial oppression and the experiences of the marginalized, while also enhancing core sociological questions. When exploring the disparate effects of exclusionary discipline policies on a specific group, researchers have suggested conducting the research using CRT, particularly when examining inequality and the oppression of people of color. Seamster and Ray (2019) state that CRT is essential for unearthing topics around racism, White supremacy, and resistance to dialogue by those who benefit from White supremacy. In addition to CRT scholarship, capturing stories that center on the voices of communities of color challenges racism and validates the reality of those narratives (Christian et al., 2019). The current study benefits from this framework because CRT has been shown to recognize the knowledge developed by

communities of color as having a more detailed understanding of their perspectives, experiences, and realities. Furthermore, CRT is also grounded in “racial realism” —a perspective that provides a realistic view for those who struggle against racism in academia, the streets, or the legal system (Christian et al., 2019). The key elements of CRT are racial education inequality, the role of education policy and practices, and recognizing gender, class, sexuality, and linguistic backgrounds.

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

The current study explores and identifies strategies to increase educational success in African American males’ quest for educational attainment. The literature review contained in this chapter explores challenges and possible solutions for academic achievement. Many scholars have cast a critical eye on African American males’ educational experiences and perspectives (Bayer & Charles, 2018; Myers & Finnigan, 2018). African American males face a daunting uphill battle when they fail to complete high school (Baldrige, 2017; Dumas & Nelson, 2017).

More than one third of African American male dropouts between the ages of 20 and 34 are incarcerated three times more than their same-aged White, Hispanic, and Asian peers, highlighting the troubling racial disparities experienced by African American males (Bayer & Charles, 2018). They have experienced imprisonment, unemployment, and exclusion, all of which weakens their potential and self-perception and hinders their educational attainment (Anyon et al., 2018; Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Hambacher, 2018; Raufu, 2017). Schools and educators often adapt a deficit mode of thinking regarding the teaching and learning of Black male students (Ellis et al., 2018; Myers & Finnigan, 2018) and is characterized by the belief that there is something wrong with Black children and are to blame for their circumstances (Brown,

2018; Pruitt et al., 2019). This thinking suggests that people are responsible for their predicament, with little or no consideration for the oppressive systems they live within.

### **African American Males in Education**

Racial inequalities are deeply rooted in U.S. history and have affected how people of color are treated (Horsford, 2017). Researchers in this discipline of racial bias and inequality have conveyed various untrue stereotypes about Black males. According to Teasley et al. (2018), the false narratives include Black males being dangerous, violent, and aloof. The most common stereotype is that of the “dangerous Black male” (Carter et al., 2017).

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln ended slavery by signing the Emancipation Proclamation; 1954 marked the historic United States Supreme Court decision that ruled separate public schools for Black and White learners was against the law in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) case (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018); the Civil Rights Act in 1964, prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and here we are in 2024 and African American men are still struggling for full acceptance (Akee et al., 2019; Austin, 2018; Brown, 2018; Loury, 2019).

Many young African American men overcome the barriers to a prosperous life, which include high rates of incarceration and being ranked dismally on nearly indicator of educational and social status in the United States (Alfieri, 2019; Carson, 2020).

During President Obama’s tenure he made young men of color a priority by creating focused initiatives to address Black male students’ educational issues. In 2014, shortly after the deplorable murder of Trayvon Martin, President Obama signed a new White House initiative entitled *My Brother’s Keeper* (Obama, 2014a). This policy empowered young men of color to be seen and heard in their drive to achieve their full potential. Like many others around the country,

the *My Brother's Keeper* initiative, such as the African American Male Initiative, was initiated to elevate Black males and support positive outcomes (Obama, 2014b).

### **African American Males Education Barriers and Graduation**

Wright maintains that we should “make every effort to preserve the African American male... before his threatened extinction becomes a reality” (1991, p. 16). This article is as relevant today as it was in 1991. Through the current study, the researcher seeks to provide a counter-narrative.

Elrich (2002) explains the legal barriers to educating children of color. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) could not reverse the systemic racism immersed in society. The words and deeds of racism continue to be felt by young African American males.

It's been 26 years since Woodson's classic *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1998), and the dismal academic performance of African American males remain virtually unchanged. According to the Jeffers (2017), the estimated national graduation rate for Black males was 59%, compared to 65% for Latino males and 80% for White males. The consistent discipline disproportionality for African American males impedes college readiness and further reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline (Adair, 2015; Jeffers, 2017). Some African American males are continuously suspended or expelled from school, while some internalize these deficit views (Challenger et al., 2020).

When young Black men fail to graduate high school, they face a dim future (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2017). Debates on the reasoning behind the bleak achievement of Black students usually attributes blame and shame from a deficit perspective by blaming Black parents, Black students, and the Black community (Ellis et al., 2018; Franklin, 2018; Myers & Finnigan, 2018). Deficit thinking is highly problematic as it becomes another platform to unload on the deficiency

of African American culture (Pruitt et al., 2019). Therefore, Black male students must navigate their schooling experience through the oppressive lens of the social, cultural, and political narrative of Black males in the larger society. The schooling experience for Black male adolescents has been plagued with a complexity of challenges that positions them at a disadvantage compared to their peers (Moore & Phelps, 2020).

### **Racial Discrimination Challenges**

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) controversial seminal study shows that Black students did not fully engage in learning because they may be seen as and ridiculed for "acting White" by their Black peers. The idea of acting White is theorized in the oppositional culture theory of racial disparities in academic performance. Rather than viewing racial/ethnic gaps as a product of structural racism, Fordham and Ogbu's oppositional culture theory suggests that the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites is rooted in the African American reaction to oppression, thus developing a culture in opposition to schooling.

Steele and Aronson (1995) found that, additionally, the threat of negative stereotypes can cause students to disengage from academic pursuits. The authors demonstrate that Black students are vulnerable to judgment by negative stereotypes about Black intellectual ability. This lowers their performance on academic tests relative to White students. Stereotype threat arouses self-doubt and anxiety. The assumption is that students use lower expectations to mediate the effects of stereotype threat. This eventually leads to disidentification with the academic domain, although they may remain optimistic about their true abilities (Morgan et al., 2017).

Ellis et al. (2018) explored the impact of racial stereotypes and racial centrality associated with a sample size of 103 urban Black male adolescents. They found that racial centrality was a significant contributor to school efficacy. Additionally, relationships through mentoring

programs played a crucial role in academic success and minimizing the effects of stereotyping. Black males continue to experience gendered racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2019), which surfaced and was supported throughout slavery and into the Jim Crow era and beyond with Black males being portrayed as sexual deviants (e.g., the “Blackbuck”), (Curry, 2017a, 2017b; Kocić, 2017). Racial discrimination and inequalities have maintained a pervasive cycle that demonstrates how Blacks were denied their rights. These rights have negatively influenced racial disparities (Akee et al., 2019; Alfieri, 2019). Although the court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) was a stepping stone to providing Black students with equity in education in the 90s, multiple court cases affected the court-ordered desegregation across U.S. districts (Brown, 2018; Smrekar & Honey, 2015). LaForett and De Marco (2020) explain that differential treatment of racial and ethnic groups in educational structures enacts racism at the institutional level. School discipline can also be considered a metric for institutionalized racism.

The distinct features of racial discrimination are differential treatment, discrimination between and against people because of their race or identity, and mainly discrimination where there are no limitations or consequences affecting Whites (Akee et al., 2019). The Black community’s common obstacles are racism, solidarity, family, economics, youth, opportunity, incarceration, and crime. Racism is ranked the most critical obstacle for Blacks and is a primary example of racial inequality experienced in Black life. The Black experience has been groomed to adhere to the dominant point of view; this has taught Blacks to feel less (LaForett & De Marco, 2020).

In the article “The Endangered Black Male Child,” Wright (1991) states, the difficulty of the African American male in America continues to be that of an endangered species. No support group has yet appeared to prevent the extinction of this valuable human resource. The media

provide us daily with the facts. However, although we often read about well-heeled individuals who lead groups of influential citizens on quests to save the manatee, crocodile, bald eagle, the Everglades, Grand Canyon, alligators, whales, the petrified forest, the Sequoia trees, no visible group seems to be interested in expending any energy to save the African American male. (p. 14)

### **Historical and Cultural Factors**

Historical and cultural forces have kept Black people out of the majority culture and have forced them into oppressive minority status. As a result, young people constantly are exposed to harmful, debilitating, anti-Black stereotypical messages from the media, the education system, and other sources (Nance, 2017; Salami et al., 2021). Because of their messages, Black Americans experience deficit-driven messages regarding academic effort and success. They doubt their intellectual ability, define academic success based on White standards, and reject their peers from mimicking White people in academic endeavors (Linwood et al., 2020; Lynch, 2017). Black students who want to succeed must let go of this oppositional social identity and appear race-less to educators in the school setting (Nance, 2017). As a result, such students take on the burden of acting White or embracing White cultural and linguistic frames of reference, allowing access to the majority culture and community and its success; however, there are social and psychological sanctions against acting White; those who do it risk losing their feelings of belonging and group membership in the Black community (Salami et al., 2021). Many students choose not to take on that burden, preferring to preserve their racial identity. This rejection of White culture can contribute to low academic performance (Carson, 2020). These behaviors and attitudes include speaking standard English, enrollment in AP, Honors, mathematics, and science classes, being wise during lessons, studying a lot or doing homework every day, acting like a



nerd, spending much time in the library, reading a lot and having too many White friends (Buckley, 2018).

Stinson (2011) study tested this hypothesis and interviewed Black men, seeking their views on achievement in school. Stinson's findings table the belief that the men performed academically, notwithstanding Fordham and Ogbu's reasoning that Black students associate academic success with "acting White." Stinson's interpretation is notable since it solidifies the schooling experiences of African American male students. Furthermore, it suggests that teacher effectiveness, expectations, relationships parental involvement, school climate, size, and school culture positively impact African American male students (de Silva et al., 2018). The young men's stories provided a counter-narrative to the prevailing discussion on African American male educational attainment.

### **Imprisonment and the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

According to Carson (2020), the imprisonment rate of Black males is 5.7 times the rate of White males. This author's findings revealed that Black males aged 18 to 19 years were significantly more likely to be jailed than White males of the same ages (Carson, 2020). In schools, Black male students are overrepresented in the least desirable areas –discipline and special education– and underrepresented in the most desirable aspects –gifted and advanced placement classes (Jeffers, 2017).

In the current study, the researcher sought to hear and listen to the concerns of those most affected by the stigma: Black males. Black males tend to be viewed through a stereotypical lens. Often, notions of them being deficient and defiant precede the students themselves. African American males are tagged as being at risk, thugs, aggressive, and disruptive in and out of school (Challenger et al., 2020; Jeffers, 2017).

A plethora of studies have focused on the school-to-prison pipeline when referring to Black males, which has become unmistakable (Johnson-Staub, 2017). It starts in early learning and continues through to high schools, from which young African American males continue to drop out and are pushed out at an alarming frequency, and ultimately dragged into the criminal justice system. The current context of education for Black males in America is discouraging, as many schools feel the need to control Black males (Jeffers, 2017). The educational attainment of Black males continues to be a societal concern. Black males are outperformed disproportionately when compared to their same-age peers of other backgrounds. The continuance of the racial disparities in academic performance between African American male high school students and their peers is alarming (Rogers et al., 2018), and served as the inspiration for this research study.

### **Racial Disparities**

The term *disparity* connotes an unjust or unfair difference and implies the need to redress this difference. The current study focuses on differences in educational outcomes and achievement of African American males (recent graduates) in the United States. The present research defines educational disparities to include those differences in educational consequences which may result from (a) differential or discriminatory treatment of ethnic and racial minority students within the educational system, (b) differences in socioeconomic status, and (c) different responses to educational systems (Amemiya et al., 2020).

In the United States, Black students are harshly and disproportionately disciplined under zero-tolerance policies for the same behaviors as their peers starting as early as elementary school (Barrett et al., 2021). The unintended consequence of excessively disciplining Black students, which removes them from the classroom as early as pre-K, increases their likelihood of contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Marchbanks et al., 2018). Many researchers have

argued that racism is embedded in education and criminal justice systems (Marchbanks et al., 2018).

The "school-to-prison pipeline" theory has been referenced frequently throughout the literature to explain why African American males are overrepresented in prisons and underrepresented in colleges and universities (Akee et al., 2019; Anyon et al., 2018). Researchers (Griffin et al., 2017; Heidelberg et al., 2021) have pointed to the stigma surrounding Black males. Consequentially, teachers consistently viewed their Black male students as divergent. As a result teachers interpret Black male behaviors as belligerent and threatening. Because of this narrative surrounding African American males, the teachers subject African American male students to increased surveillance and disciplinary action than their peers, which results in more suspensions and expulsions of African American males, further misunderstanding, and harsher treatment. African American male students may tarnish their view of education, which, in turn, affects their self-actualization toward education (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Such data are troubling and disheartening and points to the systemic racism faced by Black males as they are disproportionately suspended and expelled (Nance, 2017; Yeager et al., 2017), which may lead to other detrimental consequences regarding educational attainment (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018). Data have continually demonstrated racial disparities in disciplinary actions, resulting in less school time and adverse outcomes (Marchbanks et al., 2018; Yeager et al., 2017).

The placement in special education and the over-identification of African American males in special education have become problematic in the United States (Connor, 2017). Some researchers believe the over-identification of African American males is attributed unconsciously to racial biases held by many teachers. This may result from not being trained to deal with diversity effectively (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Zhang et al. (2014) revealed that African

American students were still the most identified in the special education eligibility categories of emotional disturbance, intellectual disabilities, and learning disabilities over time. The implementation of the zero-tolerance policy may be a contributing cause to the over-identification of African American students in special education. This has had a particularly negative impact on African Americans and students with behavioral and emotional disabilities. Many current policies on school suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions appear to target racial minorities, specifically African Americans and students with disabilities, by removing these at-risk youths from the classroom, causing a loss of instructional time. Further, these actions can contribute to the academic achievement gap.

Zero-tolerance policies in education, and other factors such as academic tracking and teacher perceptions serve as micro-aggressions in the school setting. Parents believe that educators treat African American students negatively and target them as having behavior problems. Students' time away from school is plagued with many struggles that influence their educational experiences and outcomes. Negative opinions about Black students become a negative factor in school and sometimes lead to an unequal distribution of knowledge and resources. This results in tracking and inequalities. Cooc (2017) examined teachers' beliefs to ascertain if teachers improperly perceived minority students as having a disability, and discovered that White teachers were more likely to perceive minority (Black and Hispanic) students as having a disability 1.42 to 1.56 times more than Whites. Black males have been referred to and identified for special education serves more than any other demographic group (Woodson & Harris, 2018).

Fish (2019) examined the role of racial composition in special education and the overrepresentation of African American males, and suggested that schools refer and place

students into special education by race. The debate rests on whether this is caused by discriminatory school practices. Thus, student race becomes vital to the disproportionate representation of minority students into special education. This suggests that the racialized construction of exceptionalities reflects differential academic expectations and interpretations of behavior by race/ethnicity.

According to this field of research, Black males are overrepresented in special education programs; this is mainly due to their reluctance to conform into a White dominated system (Fish, 2019). Rather than considering other risk factors, this field of research contends that minorities are exploited by bias processes which are unable to consider cultural differences.

While a vast body of research addresses external factors of minority overrepresentation in special education, other researchers have suggested that the educational system itself may be a cause of racial disparity in special education (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Diamond et al., 2019; Shifrer, 2018). CRT requires introspection on how a system may be devised to preserve the dominance of minorities.

### **Support Systems**

Support systems of African American males include their family, peers, academic staff, and community as having a role in their support system. Short (2016) described how student's approach to school is influenced and shaped by parents by schooling conviction. A child's family has a central role in advancing them and their approach to education (Epstein, 2018; Hardaway et al., 2020). Many Black American male students are raised in difficult circumstances with a limited focus on educational attainment (Kohli et al., 2017). African American family structure and parenting styles are essential to a student's approach to school and educational attainment (Day & Dotterer, 2018; Rogers et al., 2018). Moynihan (1965) asserted that the societal

challenges facing Black students could be rooted in Black social decline, including questionable Black parenting methods and the absence of Black fathers.

Allen and White-Smith (2018) examined the parental practices of four Black mothers and how they supported the education of their sons. Using the CRT lens, the researchers concentrated on, and canvassed, working-class mothers as their study participants. They wanted to learn more about parental engagement practices and sons' school experiences. The participating mothers and their sons experienced exclusionary practices, which left them feeling misunderstood and ignored. The findings revealed that racism was at the core of their sons' and their own experiences in school. Some parents felt mistreated in how they were spoken to by school staff regarding their sons.

Additionally, the persistence and existence of micro-aggressions in the schools, that diminish and undermine people of certain social groups, whether deliberately or unconscious (Applebaum, 2019). The study is significant, as it offers a counter-narrative to how Black parents are often portrayed. The findings found that the women were immensely engaged in their children's education. The parents could volunteer at their son's schools at the elementary level, interact with their teachers, and participate in field trips; however, their engagement structure changed once their sons entered high school, which impacted their involvement. The women did everything they could to make sure their children received a decent acceptable education. The findings from Allen and White-Smith's (2018) research are imperative in understanding a counter-narrative to the dominant conversation, which suggests academic success is due to dysfunctional Black parenting styles.

In a different study, Warner (2020) focused on five Black single mothers raising a son(s) between the ages of 10–18 years of age, based on “motherwork.” Motherwork provided the

framework for the anomaly of factors related to Black single mothers rearing son(s). This study highlighted valuable insights into how African American mothers navigate daily life challenges with their sons, including social and cultural impediments with daily ramifications. A holistic perspective on the Black family structure is gained through their personal stories, which counteracts the devalued and misunderstood portrayal. Notably, existing literature has seldom focused on the influences of African American mothers on their sons in contemporary American society (Applebaum, 2019). Regrettably, most research on Black single mothers has focused on the adverse effects, instead of the positive results they have had on their sons.

### **Peer Support Systems**

Peer approval becomes critical in a student's social-emotional development (Buckley, 2018). Researchers have asserted that peers have a significant influence on adolescents' behaviors and decisions more so than family members (Buckley, 2018). Studies suggest that friend group makeup involves adolescents choosing friends with comparable academic interests, and altering their behaviors to mimic their friends (Gremmen et al., 2017). Because of the adolescent desire to fit in with their peers, peer groups influence the attitudes young people adopt toward achievement and the identities they develop in the school context. Students who join academically oriented peer groups do better during high school than students who are members of less academically oriented peer groups, even when both sets of students begin high school with similar grades (Buckley, 2018). Peers can also be harsh in their sanctions against those they perceive as deviating from the reigning impression of racial and gender identity. Black male students may express their anger at being disadvantaged by withdrawing from school, thereby becoming active agents in their failure.

Douglass et al. (2017) examined the influence of same-ethnic/racial peers and friends in developing centrality. Centrality refers to how individuals bring prominence to racial group membership as part of their introspection. The results revealed that, when adolescents attended schools with a significant number of same-ethnic/racial peers, the favorable impact of same-ethnic/racial friends on centrality was subsided. This finding is significant to the study, and it further suggests that the connotation of ethnic/racial composition depends upon the convergence in which it is experienced.

### **Educational Support Systems**

The focal point of critical race theory centers on the assertion that racism is deeply rooted into American life, culminating in institutional racism (Irby, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2018). CRT has uncovered institutional racism immersed in public schools attended by African Americans. Additionally, African American males are disproportionately likely to attend under resourced public schools and have limited access to school and community supports, making them more likely to be streamed into non-academic tracks (Franklin, 2018; Hagerman, 2019).

The Liou and Rotheram-Fuller (2019) study utilized an ethnographic case study to examine urban high school reform experienced by teachers and students. The study is significant in that it reiterates the limitations faced by African American students in their schooling. Several researchers have indicated that specific factors have a favorable impact on the educational attainment of African American students, including (a) student identification with peers, (b) racial identity, and (c) mentoring (Carnoy & García, 2017; Clio et al., 2021; Hung et al., 2020; Mary et al., 2018). The positive impacts of mentoring, role models and Black teachers are of particular interest to this study as a way to improve Black male school engagement, which may



lead to improved academic outcomes (Elston, 2020; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Robinson, 2017; Woodson et al., 2020).

Teachers play a crucial part in how Black males begin to evolve and construct their schooling outlook, and findings have suggested that Black teachers are beneficial for Black students (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Camera, 2018; Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Tella, 2017). The absence of Black American teachers in the classroom hinders the overall growth and progress (Brooms, 2017; Pinkard et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Black American educators are an excellent benefit for Black students' needs in the classroom (Lavallais, 2017; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). Black American educators can generally speak to parents easily, and parents can relate to and understand the conversations (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016).

Brooms (2020) explored the secondary school experiences of twenty African American males and the daily challenges in their personal, family, peer, and school lives. Students embraced their self-concept, navigated the benefits of a sense of belonging culture, and used self-learning into persistence to pursue positive outcomes. These students' experiences are a critical counter-narrative to how African American males are stereotyped and limited by deficit thinking. A similar theme was found in a study by Rhoden (2017), who researched African American males in their second year of college who had previously attended an urban all-male charter high school in the United States. Findings suggested the significance of trust, which helped participants achieve college attendance, confidence in themselves, belief in close others, and institutional trust. The critical study underscores an emerging theme throughout the literature review on the necessity of relationships and the impact on African American males' school engagement.

## **Community Support System**

School, family and community, as well as teacher and peer relations effect Black male educational attainment (Bell, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). Therefore, awareness of the lived experiences of Black males is pivotal in embracing practices that promote school engagement and belonging (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Black American youth's financial and community drawbacks are often related to poverty (Li & Fischer, 2017). Poverty is a hardship that impacts many Black Americans living a life of hardship that causes suffering and despair (Matthew et al., 2016). Many families suffer from insufficient food and physical illness (Matthew et al., 2016). In this exhausting environment, school is not the primary concern. Poverty among Black Americans exceeds all other racialized households (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). There is evidence to suggest that poverty levels have fallen for all families, but not for Black Americans (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). In 2015, 38% of Black American children lived beneath the poverty mark, much lower than any other cultural household (Adair, 2015).

Grace and Nelson (2019) studied African American high school males residing in low socioeconomic neighborhoods and identified with the school-to-prison pipeline. The study aimed to examine the academic and institutional structures that prevented students from succeeding in public schools. The researchers conducted a phenomenological study to gain insight into the situation of students who faced school disciplinary actions, repeated encounters with the juvenile justice system, and how those experiences impacted academic outcomes (Grace & Nelson, 2019). They concluded that participants felt teachers and other staff unjustly labeled, stigmatized, and shunned them, which precluded high academic expectations, resulting in students feeling ostracized from peers and learning opportunities, having a poor perception of their internal self, and lacking the motivation to succeed academically. Outside of academic disparities and unfair

discipline practices, African American male adolescents struggle to understand their cultural experiences while adhering to the dominant European culture's behaviors and expectations. Additionally, African American males face higher social injustices, political discrimination, and marginalized educational practices within their African American community.

African American male adolescents have made minimal academic progress in past years, as evidenced by local, state, and nationwide data. Recently, students have been required to attend school in a virtual learning environment because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this has made learning difficult for students, it has been suggested that learning gaps and deficits for African American males grow in impoverished neighborhoods and low socioeconomic communities (Pruitt et al., 2019). Living in low-income urban environments has been found to affect African American males' educational attitudes directly. It has been demonstrated that students' academic attitudes are more unenthusiastic than those in the middle- and upper-income neighborhoods (Pruitt et al., 2019). Students in low-income areas present a more significant percentage of attending schools within those same neighborhoods. In most cases, lack of sufficient shelter, limited funding for city repairs, and high rates of high unemployment affect schools' physical and educational conditions, resulting in inadequate schools and low academic performance (Pruitt et al., 2019).

Poverty has been hypothesized as a reason for African American students' poor academic outcomes. Ladson-Billings (2018) suggests one of the discourses of failing urban schools is children who attend come from a "culture of poverty," defined as children, families, and communities being so maladjusted that they cannot operate in mainstream society. Ladson-Billings found the culture of poverty distressing due to the exoneration of social structures and government obligations for the disadvantaged.

Thus, the cycle of poverty continues to persist and has many harmful effects on the well-being of children, including African American males (Chetty et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2018). Not only does poverty affect African American males in the neighborhood and communities, but also at home and school. In some cases, children in poverty experience poor housing, homelessness, insufficient nutrition, food diffidence, inefficient child services, dangerous neighborhoods, and inadequately resourced (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018).

### **Racial Identity**

Racial identity is designated at birth and has far-reaching implications on life pathways, such as where someone lives, how they are educated, and access to resources (Akee et al., 2019). Many studies have investigated racial identity's role in Black students' academic achievement. The investigators of some studies have focused on racial identity and academic outcomes in Black males and racial identity attitudes and race-related socialization on the educational attainment of Black males. The problematic construction of Black males as the subject of minstrels, lazy, crime-prone, deviants and law-breaking thugs has been around forever (Appel, & Weber, 2017; Tella, 2017), and has made their way into schooling practices and policies (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). Studies about Black American males have mainly focused on them as a troubling social outcast with criminal tendencies (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Carson, 2020; James, 2019; Jeffers, 2017). This negative narrative influences society in general and Black Americans specifically (Kohli et al., 2017).

Researchers have found that academic self-efficacy is more compatible to academic performance than other self-beliefs. Among Black students, academic self-efficacy is correlated with students' study skills, perception of high school completion, feeling encouraged to participate in school, educational aspirations, and academic outcomes; however, Black academic

self-efficacy is lower than that of Whites. The problematic status of Black males in society deems it necessary to explore the relationships between the Black male experience of self and academic achievement. As racial identity attitudes and academic self-efficacy are closely related to academic achievement, determining whether there may be relationships among them affects how Black males function (Buckley, 2018).

### **Racial Identity and School**

Race, gender, and socioeconomic status influence what it means to be successful in the United States. Being a Black male means a lower likelihood of graduating high school and pursuing higher education. Those who continue to college or university are the least likely to graduate (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). African American males who graduate from high school, successfully move on to attend colleges and universities, and obtain employment with good companies often fail to receive the same success levels as those who grew up with successful role models in their lives (Francis & Darity, 2021; Johnson, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019). Furthermore, Black learners are often schooled in large urban schools with low achievement and sub-par national average graduation rates; they experience the highest expulsion rates and are more likely to be retained or required to repeat the grade (Muñiz, 2021). In short, Black males are considered to have less of a chance for a meaningful learning experience compared to their peers (Baker-Smith, 2018).

Mary et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal study to address African American students' barriers to early academic success. One of the three questions sought to delve into how African American adolescents recount their academic achievements. Study participants were drawn from under-resourced housing complexes, and 52% of families experienced extreme poverty. The findings of this study indicated that elementary students begin developing a sense of an

imbalance between themselves, their teachers, peers, and schools well before entering their high school years (Mary et al., 2018). Questions from the study did not target race issues; however, elementary and middle school participants frequently referenced racial inequities as barriers to academic success.

Additionally, participants expressed concern about the innate beliefs held by teachers about the poor educational attainment for African American students. It was further suggested that African American students (males) experience negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding their academic potential and opportunities grounded in their African American male status (Mary et al., 2018). Researchers have shown that, while a sense of belonging is essential for all children, African American male adolescents face more difficulties and challenges in school and classroom inclusivity due to living in neighborhoods characterized by high poverty and racism (Mary et al., 2018).

A volume of literature on the academic achievement of Black students has considered a broad number of mediating factors, including self-efficacy and racial identity (Buckley, 2018; Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Crocetti, 2017; Ellis et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Few studies, however, have examined the interaction of racial identity attitudes and self-efficacy in Black males. Self-efficacy plays a pivotal and pervasive role in self-regulation (Bandura, 1994). Bandura described self-efficacy as people's inner beliefs about their capability to achieve goals that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs are shaped by four primary sources of influence. An individual's prior experience is the most potent influence on the person's sense of efficacy. Previous successes strengthen self-efficacy; repeated failures weaken it, mainly if the losses occur before a sense of efficacy has taken hold (Bandura, 1994). Some failure is necessary, however, in order to develop a resilient sense of efficacy. Through setbacks and difficulties,

people can learn the importance of perseverance for successful outcomes. Once a strong efficacy belief has been established, it can withstand temporary failures (Bandura, 1994).

What people believe about their performance capability influences what self-regulating standards they adopt. Racial identity can be viewed as how people see themselves to counter a repressive society (Brooms, 2020; Buckley, 2018; Franklin, 2018). Black racial identity theories suggest that Black adolescents must develop their identity in an environment where they often experience prejudice, covert and overt racial discrimination, and structural barriers to success (Brooms, 2020; Buckley, 2018; Franklin, 2018). Black identity development is separate from normal personal identity development and is the normative response to such racial oppression. Therefore, a realistic examination of identity formation in Black adolescents must include an analysis of their response to the racial/ethnic climate of the larger society in which they live (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2018). As Black adolescents begin to explore beyond their immediate familial environment, the community reflects their Blackness to them, often through prejudice, covert and overt racial discrimination, and the structural barriers they often encounter (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2018).

In 2019, Brooms conducted a qualitative research study that examined 550 African American students who attended an all-male public charter secondary school. This researcher aimed to unpack the educational experiences of African American males, all of whom enrolled in the same public charter school and lived in the same urban area where two thirds of students inhabited low-income households. Data collection consisted of interviews, which delved into their educational experiences. A phenomenological methodological approach was used to collect participants' stories and ideal paths to college and beyond.

Students felt a welcoming and supportive atmosphere that increased their self-efficacy and beliefs. Students also noted that robust teacher relationships are essential for learning. This study's findings are important for parents and educational stakeholders to consider improving student performance, especially in large urban schools. Students found that school culture and their sense of belonging influenced them to feel valued and affirmed, providing future academic opportunities for success. Previous studies have shown the interconnectedness of self-efficacy and how students relate academic achievement, educational goal-setting trajectories, and collegial aspirations to their perception of themselves and their ability to succeed. Although such research studies were drawn from varying contexts to examine the effects of self-efficacy, research data have revealed a strong correlation between African American students' belief in what they can academically achieve and what is achieved (Hung et al., 2020; Jett, 2019).

In a different study, Howard et al. (2017) sought to identify best practices within the home, school, and community that positively impacted Black and Latino males in Los Angeles County. These scholars emphasized the necessity and significance of student-teacher relationships and the need to extend supportive relationships beyond the classroom. Additionally, they cited the importance of challenging established views of masculinity. The study is significant because it amplifies the voices of Black and Latino males to personalize their success and defy predictable narratives of underachievement, and better understand what drives them to succeed. Furthermore, the study reveals the significance of the home environment on Black and Latino males' desire to be academically successful for their families and community. The stories of emigration verified the commitment and sacrifice parents endured to give the young men a chance at a better life and to pursue their dreams. These findings have implications for the significance of teacher/student relationships as a contributor to African American male schooling



success and the importance of mentoring and support programs for African American males (Booker & Brevard, 2017; Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017).

Huerta et al. (2018) examined the college-going identity formation for Black, Latino, Asian American, and Pacific Islander high school students. These researchers highlighted the importance of self-concept and resilience, and explored the pressure to pay for higher education. Their findings revealed how young men of color negotiate and navigate their circumstances and deal with their goals and how tensions and aspirations shape their goals beyond high school. In developing their racial identity, Black adolescents must attempt to integrate the messages and experiences of the larger society with the values of their culture. As a result, they do not fit in with the school environment, which reflects the predominant White culture. Therefore, they withdraw from striving for academic success, equating it with White culture and values. Assimilating comes at too high a price to their Black self-identity.

### **Racial Identity and Family**

Over the past half-century, changes to the family structure have been significant in the United States, including African American families. In 1970, 28% of African American homes were single-parent homes led by females; however, in 2018, 65% of African American homes were single-parent homes compared to Hispanic (53%), American Indian (53%), and White (24%) homes (Annie, 2020). Young Black males do not have natural Black male role models within their homes and communities. Young African American males from lower-income areas, many raised by single mothers, grandparents, and other family members, are the most impacted by the lack of positive Black male role models (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2020; Kumah-Abiwu, 2019; Linwood et al., 2020).

How parents raise their children is critical to the children's social development. Allen and White-Smith (2018) offered a window into how 15 parents of African American boys aged 3–8 conceived and implemented strategies for their sons' social and emotional development. Their findings revealed that negative messages and low expectations are communicated to young boys about race and gender, which impacts young African American boys' developing racial and gender identities. These findings are significant, as they may impact African American boys' interest in school.

Parental participation in school has been linked to positive educational outcomes (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). There is, however, a discrepancy in terms of parental engagement and student academic performance for high school students (McQuiggan & Megra, 2017). Many studies have suggested that parental involvement in a child's schooling differed according to grade level, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. (Kerbaiv & Bernhardt, 2018; McQuiggan & Megra, 2017; Park & Holloway, 2018; Thomson, 2018).

The United States has the highest father absenteeism rates in the world (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Census data may illuminate and understand African American males' daily challenges. Findings from this study may provide insights to educators regarding factors that influence schooling experience of African American males with absent fathers. The dilemma of the absent father in the African American community has had a far reaching damaging effect for families and communities. The role of the African American mother has shifted to compensate for absent fathers requiring them to do more and be more. The legacy of slavery and oppression, have been instrumental to the condition of the African American family. The man is sometimes ambivalent of his role in the family system (Kruk, 2019; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019).

Prior fatherhood research was based on a White middle-class male model, which was the norm for all groups of people, including Black fathers (Henry et al., 2020). The examination of Black fatherhood roles through a middle-class White male norm has resulted in a culturally mismatched view and labeled Black families and fathers as dysfunctional. Therefore, even positive Black family characteristics have been overlooked in the literature and portrayed as deviant compared to the majority norm (Henry et al., 2020). A lack of guidance from positive Black male role models impacts Black males from lower-income communities, often negatively, as they subsequently struggle to make choices that lead to successful life outcomes (Linwood et al., 2020; Small, 2018; Woodson et al., 2020). Although many Black males from lower-income communities do not have positive Black male influences, numerous successful adult Black males overcame their circumstances without supporting positive Black male figures (Laurencin & Murray, 2017).

In addition, Curtis et al. (2017) researched the impact of the African American father or father figures on African American adolescents. These authors speculated that African American adolescents who live with their father or father figure and have a meaningful and positive relationship would experience positive outcomes, such as higher grades, fewer school suspensions, and a higher interest in attending college (Caughy et al., 2020; Coleman et al., 2019; Lee & Rispoli, 2019; Lemmons & Johnson 2019).

### **Racial Issues**

Racial issues refer to the widespread presence of race and racism in the U.S. educational system, criminal justice system, and other institutions (Kempf, 2020). Education is the mechanism used to distribute financial control and social status and facilitate societal structures;

however, equity does not exist for all members of American society (Johnson et al., 2019). African American males face racism and discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). The disparity of income, economic segregation, and institutional racism play a part in the disadvantage faced by African American males (Bayer & Charles, 2018).

The term “microaggression” is something said, an attitude, or action, which can be intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or ill will toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups (Applebaum, 2019). This term helps explain the daily racism experienced by marginalized groups, yet invisible to oblivious onlookers and perpetrators. High school settings often find Black males experiencing systemic racial micro-aggressions, unfair discipline policies and practices, academic streaming, and a euro-centric curriculum (Francis & Darity, 2021). Black males in high school often choose not to engage fully in school compared to their White peers, which leads to misconceptions by educators and their potential to learn. These perceptions about African American males serve as frequently used racial microaggressions in the K–12 context (Applebaum, 2019). Biased racial microaggressions damage participants’ learning process and negatively impact self-image, academic performance, and social navigation skills (Hotchkins, 2016).

Thomas et al. (2020) utilized qualitative interview data to highlight the racialized experiences of six participants recruited to a Catholic high school seeking gifted student-athletes. The Black student-athletes attending this predominantly White school became the target of anti-Blackness while experiencing exclusion, which made their schooling experience complex and far removed from what they initially thought was an escape and upgrade from public school education. The findings are significant as they underscore the experiences of African American males in learning environments where they are stereotyped, excluded, and exposed to

microaggressions. Still on the topic of microaggressions, Hotchkins (2016) conducted a qualitative study to understand how Black males retaliate to microaggressions from White teachers. All six participants studied attended a racially diverse high school. Participants were interviewed, observed, and participated in a focus group, where two themes emerged. First, his study revealed that White teachers collectively viewed Black males from a deficit perspective. Secondly, this analysis uncovered how students adjusted their behavior based on their environment.

Anderson (2019) discussed the familiarity of American Americans living in a racialized society from the courtroom to the church, and probed how racism is connected to the educational experiences of African American students. Issues such as systemic racism, in which policies contribute to resource allocation of schools in underserved communities, are engrained in the fabric of the United States while stoked by upward trending racially charged hate crimes (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). Social media spotlights these tensions and makes racial fatigue unavoidable, making these vicarious experiences harmful (Liu et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2019).

Marsh and Noguera (2018) explored how African American males negotiate the stigma of racial stereotypes in school, which often referred to their poor academic skills, the need for more academic sports, and their prioritizing sports over academics. This racist stereotype of Black males has morphed into the gendered stereotype of portraying Black males as the criminally inclined predator (Russell-Brown, 2019). Russell-Brown further summarized that African American males might become weary of the constant daily racial strife, which comes from the stigma about African Americans promoted in the media, making them virtually impossible to ignore. These findings are significant, as they speak to the impact and power of deficit and pathology experienced by African American males.

Allen and White-Smith (2018) examined the schooling experience of African American males in a U.S. high school and how they navigate the oppressive structures, practices, and narrative pathologies. They further argued that schools are places where prevailing views of Black masculinities are often enforced and sometimes replicated, which is significant to this study. This underscores the challenges African male students must negotiate daily. Given the preponderance of deficit discourse about Black males in education, this study aimed to provide a counter-narrative (Appel & Weber, 2017).

The study of academic achievement has been an important topic of interest for decades, focusing on African American underachievement (Griffin et al., 2017; James, 2019). Researchers have revealed that the academic underachievement of African American males is a troubling dilemma and can be identified as a national epidemic (Franklin, 2018; Grace & Nelson, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019). The academic underachievement of African American males has been a challenging problem for many decades in urban schools in America. In this study, the researcher aimed to explore the schooling experiences of recent African American male graduates, with further insight into the strategies that contributed to their academic success. The underwhelming academic performance of African American males permeates overall academic performance in many public schools nationwide. The stubborn existence of the disparity in educational attainment of African American males is the reason for this study.

In attempts to explain why this achievement gap exists, people concerned have cast blame on causal factors like lack of parental engagement, family values, ineffective of schools, ineffective teachers, and the lack of academic interest, and an individual's learning mindset (Dumas & Nelson, 2017; Ferguson, 2020; Franklin, 2018; McWhinney, 1954). Due to the

intricacy of the problem, a multifaceted approach must be utilized to tackle the issue at the root level.

The factors contributing to the achievement gap are numerous, inherently complex, and stubbornly resistant to change. It is accepted that many of these complex factors are beyond the control of educators; however, it is argued that schools can successfully mitigate these external forces when students are actively engaged in their own learning process. Researchers have posited that the persistent achievement gap between Black male students and their White peers results from systemic issues rather than inherent differences in their potential to learn. This research has shown that differences in socioeconomic status, family cultural resources, school quality, racial composition, and bias and prejudice in schools all act as mechanisms that link race to academic achievement (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hackett et al., 2018).

Schools across the nation are alarmed about the plight of African American males. However, the resilience of Black males needs to be highlighted as the narrative of Black males comes from a deficit perspective. Understanding how Black males achieve academic status can provide insights to their resilience and provide a way forward for supporting their educational attainment.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Researchers intent on unpacking the achievement gap look to discover meaning as to why African American males continue to be academically outperformed by their peers. Researchers have increasingly moved from viewing achievement as a problem to a symptom of a problem. Therefore, the narrative is now less about a student's lack of achievement and more about a lack of opportunity for genuine learning engagement (Reardon et al., 2019). The researcher of the current study acknowledges the size and continuing persistence of the Black male achievement

gap. The Black male achievement gap has been a constant, and scholars have consistently revealed that Black males lag in almost all aspects of education. Thus, examining Black males' social challenges and diminishing their motivation and self-esteem becomes essential. The literature review examined various factors that influenced the educational attainment of African American males. African American males encounter significant challenges that impact their image and status. Challenges in education are salient (Warren, 2016). The literature review probed societal factors such as socioeconomic status, family structure and stereotypes about African American males and how educators perceive African American male students.

Furthermore, barriers to success are underscored by persistent racism and discrimination directed at African American males. The roadblocks experienced by Black males are unique to their social position in American society (Curry, 2017a, 2017b). Society has created a distinct conceptualization of African American males, which impacts their success and hinders their contributions to the community. Chapter 3 restates the purpose statement and discusses the researcher's role, as well as the study's participants, research method and design, data collection instruments and techniques, interview protocols, population and sampling, data organization techniques, data analysis process, reliability and validity, and ethical considerations.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The proposed qualitative phenomenological research study aims to identify the strategies that contributed to the increase in graduation rates that could directly impact future African American males' graduation goals in northern Chicago high schools. A qualitative research methodology is suitable for understanding and clarifying a complex issue (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The findings from this phenomenological research may provide extensive knowledge of the strategies to support the academic attainment of African American males.

#### **Purpose Statement**

Through this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher sought to identify strategies that have contributed to the educational attainment of African American male students. The target population for this study includes recent African American male graduates from northern Chicago high schools. The study's site is northern Chicago. Chicago schools' 5-year graduation rates have risen for all ethnic groups (Annie, 2020). While this rise is a positive sign for Chicago-area students, African American male graduation rates must be tracked simultaneously (Koumpilova, 2021). Kempf (2020) posited that this is due to the deficit orientation of academic research, educational practice, and portrayals of Black males in media and society. The current study may contribute to social change by providing research-based strategies that African American males can utilize to succeed in their college careers. Ultimately, this information may foster positive social change because academic success for the African American male students helps them contribute towards the economic and social development of African American families and societies.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is to prompt, probe, and encourage participants to gain views of their experiences (Roberts et al., 2020). Themes were analyzed for consistency, and patterns were established. The researcher was also a powerful instrument for collecting and analyzing data, which was the foundation of the research. An open-ended interview protocol was used to ensure consistency across interviews and explore the perceptions and experiences that have contributed to participants' academic success (Roberts et al., 2020).

Creswell and Poth (2017) stated that effective qualitative researchers disclose their backgrounds with mention about how they may sway their explanation of data. The researcher for this study identifies as an African American male, which allowed him to identify with the participants and thus, understand the strategies which contributed to their academic success. According to Jootun et al. (2009), the researcher must ignore preconceived ideas about the topic and avoid misinterpreting participants' phenomena, putting aside the researcher's own beliefs, and clarifying the researchers' ideas, thoughts, and opinions about the subject openly and honestly.

The study complied with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for conducting research with human subjects. Protecting subject participants is a priority (Roberts et al., 2020). *Ethical protections* are the actions and steps taken to protect participants from harm and disclose comprehensive findings (Roberts et al., 2020). Ethical protections are also an essential part of the social research process. Furthermore, as summarized by the Belmont Report, the researcher adhered to ethical guidelines with human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The Belmont Report recommends that informed consent and privacy be sought, and that risks and benefits be

evaluated (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The same interview questions for all participants were used to avoid bias. The triangulation strategy was adopted to interpret findings from sources and use the evidence to strengthen justification for themes in the study, as well as the individual experiences of participants with one another.

Semi-structured interviews, an interview technique where participants share lived experiences, was utilized to garner descriptive data in the subjects' own words to develop insight as to how subjects interpret some of the world (Roberts et al., 2020). Additionally, field notes were taken to document non-verbal communication while listening to the stories and experiences of the participants.

### **Participants**

The term "participants" in a qualitative study refers to the subjects selected by the researcher to inform the research questions and promote the comprehension of the problem circumstance of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The eligibility criterion for the current study ensured that participants were close to the research problem and phenomenon, and were carefully selected based on the research study topic and questions (Roberts et al., 2020). The researcher established a working partnership with the participants by requiring each participant to provide informed consent, which, according to Creswell and Poth (2017), helps build trust between researchers and participants. The population of interest was African American males aged 18–20 years old, who are recent northern Chicago high-school graduates, and who are connected to the ABC Community Hub (pseudonym). The study's geographic location is northern Chicago. ABC Community Hub's goals include supporting students through mentoring, academic support, and job readiness programs. Initial subjects were selected through a recruitment flyer (see Appendix

B), emails, and a message board at ABC Community Hub. Participants were chosen by purposeful sampling, a process that supports the selection of participants that can provide relevant insights about the topic under study (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020).

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

A qualitative research method was utilized in this study to represent practical approaches to understanding people's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The present study involved a qualitative research method with a phenomenological design, which effectively studies a complex problem using open-ended questions within a semi-structured interview framework. Creswell and Poth state that interviews allow the researcher to manage line of questioning and capture the participants' firsthand knowledge and historical information. The interview's focus allowed participants to expand on information based on their perceptions of strategies that have helped them complete high school. The research method is appropriate because the focus of this research was to identify and explore strategies that contribute to the academic success of African American males.

The qualitative phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2017) effectively investigates an empirical topic by utilizing open-ended questions within a semi-structured interview framework. The research method is appropriate because it explored the participants' strategies contributing to their academic success. Qualitative research supported this study in its quest for meaning from the participants and thus, had the edge over a quantitative analysis by providing a more wholesome analysis of the phenomenon. In contrast to quantitative research, the qualitative phenomenological study focuses on the participants' lived experiences (Roberts et al., 2020).

## **Research Design**

Phenomenological studies are trustworthy and credible when their underlying methodological assumptions are reported, which provides transparency to explain a phenomenon through the lens of human lived experiences (Roberts et al., 2020) by seeking to understand the context of the lived experience of a particular issue for a person or group of persons. Additionally, phenomenological research is used when data is collected using semi-structured interviews, which give participants the freedom to express themselves. According to Picton et al. (2017), interviews explore participants' consciousness, and participants have considerable control. A phenomenological design was chosen over other designs because the phenomenological design helped capture participants' perceptions and experiences and is the most widely used design for qualitative methods. Through the lens of critical race theory, African American males lived experiences were effectively highlighted, allowing the reader to experience a more meaningful connection to the essence of the lived experience through the narratives of the participants (Picton et al., 2017).

For this proposed phenomenological study, the data collection was approached strategically. Such an approach allowed descriptive answers of "what" the participants experienced and how the phenomena experienced affected participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This approach focused on all participants' everyday experiences as a recent African American male graduate from a northern Chicago high school.

## **Population and Sampling**

The target population for this study included African American male graduates from northern Chicago high schools. Participants were recruited from a message board at the ABC Community Hub. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit participants. The intent of a

purposive sample is to construct a sample representative of the population, which occurs when researchers rely on their judgment when choosing participants to participate in a study (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020). Creswell and Poth (2017) recommends a sample size of six for valid phenomenological research studies. The number of individuals selected to participate in this phenomenological study depended on the range of experiences captured to the point of saturation. A more precise understanding of the experience would not be found through further discussion with participants (Roberts et al., 2020). The researcher's plan in this study was to conduct interviews with eight to 12 participants or until saturation was reached. Hennink and Kaiser (2021) defined saturation as a point in data collection when no further insights or issues emerge and data begin to recur so that any additional data becomes expendable, indicating that appropriate sample size has been achieved. Saturation occurs when there is repetitiveness in the information-gathering process of data (Saunders et al., 2018). The researcher analyzed the data periodically until saturation, at which point additional interviews did not provide new information about the issue under investigation. To determine if data saturation had been achieved, all the responses to the interview questions were reviewed while noting the emerging issues. In the subsequent interview sessions, repetition of identified issues from previous interviews were noted as well. This process continued until nothing new was identified and, at that point, data saturation was considered reached. Inclusion criteria for this study included participants who were (a) 18–20 years old, (b) Black, (c) male, (d) recent graduates, and (e) mentored at the ABC Community Hub.

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained and permission from the ABC Community Hub was granted, an IRB-approved recruitment flyer providing an overview of the study was posted at the ABC Community Hub. Those who responded to the brochure and met

the above criteria were invited to participate in this study via email (see Appendix C). Daily reminders were sent via email to no respondents. Recruitment information and study protocols were outlined in a message sent via email to ensure a homogenous sample (Dressler & Dressler, 2019).

The consent form addressed all relevant confidentiality and ethical issues related to participation in the study. The consent form also offered the researcher's contact information, including name, address, email address, and telephone number (see Appendix D). Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

All interviews took place at a time that was convenient for participants. The researcher informed the participants about voluntary participation and that there would be no penalty for withdrawing from the research or not responding to any questions asked. Participants' names were masked to provide confidentiality to those who agreed to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2017). All participants' names were given pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of their identities. Ethical protections were also necessary to ensure the research's validity.

The four guidelines of the code of ethics research was adopted to protect the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These four guidelines include informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and accuracy. First, the African American males selected for this study were asked to participate voluntarily and were informed of the nature of the study. Participants were able to withdraw from this study at any time. Second, the strict confidentiality of all collected data used in this proposed study was maintained fully throughout the process, ensuring the interviews were carried out privately, with both participants and data gathered protected at all times.

All IRB guidelines are critical when it comes to studies that involve human participants. Thus, IRB guidelines were followed to ensure that participants were protected, reduce the risk of exploitation and unanticipated harm, and provide participants' safety. The details included in the research were based on the quality of data and its relevance to the investigation.

### **Ethical Research**

This study was conducted by the following three ethical principles of the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). No data was collected until written approval from the IRB was obtained. Standard policies and procedures for research were followed. Upon IRB approval, data collection began by contacting potential participants who responded to the recruitment flyer via email. Participants were advised about their right to withdraw, the nature of the research, and the chance to provide feedback. Confidentiality was maintained by deidentifying data by assigning IDs to each participant. Digital files will be kept secure on a password-protected flash drive for five years, after which they will be destroyed appropriately to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All physical information and paper documents will be kept secure in a locked safe for five years and destroyed appropriately to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The researcher was and continues to be the only person to access the study data. The researcher was a facilitator in this study, followed all IRB guidelines, ensured the participants were protected, and ensured participants' safety. The informed consent provided information about participants' right to withdraw or not participate. After the interview, the participants were thanked for their participation and informed of the results.



### **Data Collection Instruments**

The researcher collected data through a face-to-face interview that was conducted at the study's site, ABC Community Hub. Semi-structured interviews were used as an instrument to collect data. Semi-structured interviews rely on participants' reflections and memories to help participants revisit their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The semi-structured interview involved the researcher asking each open-ended question (Appendix E) and using probes to understand participants' responses. Field notes were taken during and after each interview with participants, along with the review of each transcript. The field notes assisted the researcher in understanding contextual information while reflecting on conversations with participants for further analysis. The semi-structured interview sessions were audio-recorded. NVivo 12 was used to transcribe the audio recordings and then save them to a secure digital file on an encrypted password-protected flash drive.

It is essential to develop a bond of mutual trust between the interviewer and the interviewee to avoid a power imbalance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Each participant was greeted warmly. The interview protocols and the participants' withdrawal rights were clearly communicated. Participants were assured that their feedback was vital. Accurate notes regarding interviewee comments were created and sent to participants to ensure that they agreed with the transcripts. Upon the conclusion of the interview, each participant was thanked personally.

Conducting semi-structured interviews also alleviates a researcher-centered bias. Semi-structured interviews enable scholars to gather individual experiences and reflections using an interview protocol (Appendix E). The researcher also sent the transcriptions back to participants for approval and member checking to ensure correct transcription and improve the research study's accuracy, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Member checking

is a validation technique in qualitative analysis to determine how credible the results are (Roberts et al., 2020). Member checking involves taking data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Member checking allows participants to play an active role in the research by ensuring that their experiences are documented truthfully and accurately. All data collected from all participants will be secured in a private location and stored in a password-protect computer for five years, after which it will be destroyed appropriately to protect the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **Data Organization Technique**

Data organization was essential in making sense of the information. During the interview process, field notes were taken and conversations converted. The audio recordings were converted into transcription via an upload to NVivo. Patterns and themes that emerged were beneficial to this study to facilitate the organization of the data. Designs and themes were more easily identified, and different categories were developed to analyze the data. The semi-structured interview technique was an appropriate approach for the researcher to study participants' phenomena and shared practices, as structured interviews are flexible and allow extended interaction and various responses, reducing the risk of bias (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Probing techniques enabled the interviewer to gather in-depth data on strategies contributing to the increase in graduation rates, which could directly impact future African American males' graduation goals in northern Chicago high schools. This technique allowed the researcher to gather in-depth data about the topic by probing responses until they felt that participants had fully expressed their feelings and thoughts. The researcher reviewed the interviewee's transcripts and match these with the audio recordings to ensure validity. Member checking was used so

participants could check essential points for accuracy after collecting data. Participants were given transcripts of the interview to review and ensure that their answers had been transcribed correctly. Researchers must acknowledge that all research findings are shaped by the approach used to collect the research, and the different data collection methods may offer different results (Creswell & Poth, 2017). According to Creswell and Poth, a reliable interview protocol is key to obtaining valid interview data.

### **Data Analysis**

In phenomenology research, data analysis requires a suspension of personal judgment, objective data, and both textural and structural analysis of what is being expressed by participants. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) describe analyzing qualitative data in four broad steps: organizing the data, coding the data, discovering descriptions and themes, and reporting the findings.

A qualitative computer data analysis program helped analyze the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative software programs are popular and help researchers organize searches and sort information in text or image databases. Using data analysis software, the researcher located all text associated with specific codes to query the relationship among codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using data analysis programs is an efficient means of locating and storing qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). NVivo is a software developed by QSR International for qualitative data analysis. It allows researchers to store and analyze unstructured data. (Phillips-Stock et al., 2018). Data analysis was done inside the NVivo software to identify emergent themes based on the perceptions of the participant's schooling experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

NVivo pays attention to a participant's unique terminology and codes; the codes were created to ensure all concepts stayed close to participants' own words. Participants captured vital elements of a phenomenon described. The researcher followed the qualitative data analysis process suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017), which contains the following steps: Step 1 is to prepare and organize data for the analysis by transcribing interviews, scanning material optically, typing field notes, providing visual material, and arranging and sorting data into different types depending on information sources. Step 2 is to look at or read all data, asking questions such as: What general ideas are participants providing? What were your impressions of the overall depth, use of information, and credibility? What was the tone of the ideas?

The qualitative researcher takes notes over transcripts during this stage. In Step 3, the researcher codes all data. Coding organizes data by bracketing and writing a word representing a category in the margins. Coding involves taking text data gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences into categories, and labeling categories with a term based on the participant's actual language (Williams & Moser, 2019). In Step 4, the final stage, the researcher generates a description and themes. The coding process describes the people, setting, and themes or categories for analysis. The report includes detailed information about places, people, or events in an environment. Themes display multiple individual perspectives and are supported by quotations and specific evidence. Themes are analyzed in a general description as in phenomenology. In Step 5, themes and descriptions are represented in the qualitative narrative.

### **Reliability and Validity**

#### **Reliability**

Creswell and Creswell (2017) state that researchers need to take steps in the study to check for the reliability of the researcher's findings. Qualitative reliability describes the

researcher's approach as consistent among different projects and researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research relies on subjective, qualitative data gathered through stories, observations, and documents.

Several qualitative reliability procedures were used to determine the study was dependable. Dependability was addressed by utilizing several procedures. The first procedure was to check transcripts to ensure they do not contain apparent mistakes during transcription. The second procedure was to make sure there was no drift in the definition of codes or a shift in the meaning of codes during the coding process, which was accomplished by comparing data with codes continuously, and writing notes about the codes and the codes' definitions. The third procedure was for the researcher to coordinate the communication by documenting meetings and reviewing the analysis. The fourth procedure was cross-checking codes developed by different researchers by comparing independent results. Using several of the abovementioned techniques provided evidence of the researcher's consistent results in the present study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Reliability was reached using qualitative computer software to determine the coding consistency.

Transferability is concerned mainly with the study's findings and how the results can apply to other settings and contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Researchers ensure transferability by using thick descriptions and verbatim transcripts in data analysis to ensure dependability (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Credibility replaces internal validity and roots in actual value, which asks whether the researcher articulated and developed a specific confidence level in the findings based on the phenomenon under investigation (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). The actual value came from exploring in-depth human experiences performed by participants, which did not lead to universal truth, but an in-depth understanding of that person's reality. Credibility cannot exist

without dependability, which is the root of quality. The researcher took notes throughout the data analysis process (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

### **Validity**

Validity is essential for all research studies. Qualitative validity refers to the accuracy of the findings in a research study (Creswell, 2014). Ensuring validity means addressing the dependability component by ensuring that the research findings accurately and appropriately describe accuracy and credibility measures, what the investigator aims to measure (Tracy, 2010). By using strategies such as triangulation, the researcher ensured that this phenomenological study is reliable and validated. Researchers have recommended using multiple methods when collecting data to guarantee validity in triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Triangulation of data pertains to the use of several sources of data to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of a given phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell, using multiple sources (interviews, field notes analysis, and member-checking) allows for verifying what participants share in an interview compared to what may be read in a provided document.

Field notes were taken during and after the interviews with participants, along with the review of each transcript. The field notes assisted the researcher in understanding contextual information while reflecting on conversations with participants for further analysis. Member checking of the findings with participants was used to improve the accuracy of the research study project, thus enhancing transferability.

Achieving credibility in this phenomenological study required the researcher to take the appropriate steps to ensure participants felt comfortable that their personal information or participation would not compromise their employment or personal or professional relationships (Roberts et al., 2020). The researcher utilized brief follow-up questioning for clarity to ensure the

participants' stories were credible, when necessary. Additionally, the chosen methodological procedure and connotations objectively derived from participants' shared stories helped improve the study's generalizability and transferability.

Phenomenological reality is associated with several concerns. These include reflexivity, transferability, and credibility (Roberts et al., 2020). Reflexivity, transferability, and credibility emphasize openness, the adoption of a reflective attitude, and questioning pre-understanding, and are essential to acknowledge and consider during the research process to engender rigor and validity.

Reflexivity is connected to the methodological principles of a reflective attitude and questioning pre-understanding. Reflexivity is maintained during the entire research process as the researcher sustains a reflective mindset. Themes and data are examined and understood by the researcher. Qualitative researchers consider that the data might differ from the researcher's understanding. Data saturation is essential to establish validity in qualitative research. When no new information emerges with additional interviews (Fofana et al., 2020), according to Sundler et al. (2019), researchers should ask questions, concerning validity when conducting a thematic analysis, as follows:

1. Is the analysis presented thoroughly?
2. Were the analytical themes and processes presented demonstrated with quotes?
3. Is it clear how themes were derived from the data?
4. Are the findings presented logically?
5. Do the findings contribute new knowledge?
6. Were the findings presented relevant and meaningful?
7. Has the analysis and findings been reviewed thoroughly?

8. Has the researcher critically reflected on the process and examined their role and influence during the analysis?

Transferability refers to the relevance and usefulness of the findings. Transferability is not related to methodological principles, but it may result from them. Transferability measures whether the findings are sound and whether the study adds new knowledge to what is already known.

Sundler et al. (2019) assert that credibility refers to the findings' meaningfulness and how well the results are presented. The analysis must be transparent, meaning that the researcher should present the research as thoroughly as possible to strive for credibility in the study. Credibility lies in the methodology and presentation of the findings. The researcher ensured the credibility of this study through triangulation. Triangulation is the researcher's strategy to test credibility by merging data from different sources. Researchers need to describe how the thematic analysis is performed and how the research is derived from the themes and data identified; thus, the researcher's descriptions were consistent and transparent.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Chapter 3, the researcher outlined the research design, including the research and methodological design, role of the researcher, setting, population and sample, ethical procedures, data collection, and data analysis techniques, and discussed how the researcher established reliability and validity. Chapter 4 contains additional information regarding the findings of the collected data and a discussion of the results, implications, and limitations. In-depth discussions of the findings and suggestions for future research are included in Chapter 5.



## Chapter 4: Results

This study took place in northern Chicago at the ABC Community Hub, a not-for-profit organization. ABC Community Hub's goals include supporting students through mentoring and academic support and job readiness programs. The ABC Community Hub was an ideal location to post a recruitment flyer for the study, as many African American male students from surrounding northern Chicago schools use ABC Community Hub for tutoring and job readiness support. Data saturation was reached after 12 semi-structured interviews, as no new information was shared during interviews. The interview data from Participants 13 and 14 did not yield any new insights to the themes but were used to solidify and support the emerging themes from the previous interviews.

The qualitative research design was perfect for the exploration of strategies that participants viewed as beneficial to their academic success. The researcher interviewed 12 recent African American male high school graduates to discover insights of their high school acumen. This study was steered by the following research question: What specific strategies elevated the graduation rates in African American males in northern Chicago high schools?

The researcher collected data through face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. In Chapter 4, the researcher presents the findings from the collected data, beginning with information illustrating the demographic makeup of the participants.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process started with 12 recent African American male high school graduates. The researcher collected data by interviewing participants selected through a

purposeful sample. NVivo was used as a guide to search for meaning from individual participants' interviews to establish patterns from the participants' experiences and perceptions.

When the researcher made initial contact with participants, the researcher gave an explanation for the breadth of work, reviewed the consent forms, and introduced the research question. The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews after they received the signed consent forms. The researcher ensured the consistency of data collection by preparing open-ended semi-structured interview questions beforehand. The semi-structured interview was appropriate for the study and allowed probing to occur during the interview sessions to encourage participants to elaborate on their rich lived experiences. The researcher ensured reliability by introducing the study to each participant and reviewing individual consent forms. Member checking was conducted after data collection, as each participant reviewed their own transcripts for accuracy. All interviews were recorded for transcription purposes.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements were followed, including giving each participant consent forms, reviewing consent forms, and obtaining participants' signatures before proceeding with the interviews to protect their confidentiality. The researcher ensured the consistency of data collection by preparing open-ended semi-structured interview questions beforehand.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher used a phenomenological design in this qualitative study, and participants with expertise in the phenomenon being studied were recruited based on their experiences. The researcher took notes in a journal during the interviews and audio recorded each interview for reliability and validity purposes. A reflective journal was kept throughout the entire interview process. Further, the researcher used bracketing to set aside their assumptions about the research

phenomena. After each interview, data were organized, transcribed, and compared with interview notes and recordings. The qualitative data analysis tool NVivo, was used to analyze data collected from participants. NVivo was used to ascertain the keywords from each participant's conversations based on patterns from their experiences and perceptions. Codes were developed by keyword identification in NVivo, which showed grouped statements involving themes. The researcher ensured confidentiality by securing all raw data in a locked safe and using pseudonyms to protect the identities of all participants.

### **Demographic Profiles**

All the participants ( $n = 12$ ) met the inclusion criteria, which included (a) aged 18–20 years old, (b) African American, (c) male, (d) recent high school graduate, and (e) from a northern Chicago high school. Table 2 includes an overview of participants' demographics. Participants' ages ranged from 18–20. Figure 3 depicts parents' qualification.

**Table 2***Participant Demographics*

S.No	Name	Pseudonym	Age	Graduation Year	Parents Qualification	
					Mother	Father
1	EA	Mandela	20	2021	HS	HS
2	MF	PG	20	2021	HS	College
3	SS	Locks	19	2022	0	0
4	AS	Dominique	20	2021	0	0
5	TO	Ewing	20	2021	HS	0
6	JS	Anthony	19	2022	HS	HS
7	RG	Jordan	19	2022	HS	0
8	JP	Penny	20	2021	0	0
9	DH	Shaq	19	2021	0	HS
10	L H	Barack	18	2022	HS	College
11	IA	Heywood	18	2022	HS	0
12	JA	Kendrick	18	2022	HS	College

**Table 3***Chicago High School Graduation Rate*

Year	Asian American	Black	White	Hispanic	All
2017	94	74	89	82	79
2018	93	76	88	83	81
2019	92	77	88	82	81
2020	92	78	89	85	83
2021	92	80	91	85	84

## Results

### **Theme #1: High School Graduation Means a Better Life for Me and My Family**

The participants discussed their schooling experiences in response to the overarching question: *What specific strategies are used to increase graduation rates in African American males in northern Chicago high schools?* Participants viewed their academic success (i.e., graduating from high school) as future achievement and financial opportunity. They believed graduating from high school set them up for future success and was the path to reaching their goals, which was accomplished through hard work, support, and the ability to block out the negative stereotypes that come with being Black. Mandela believed that graduating from high school meant gaining knowledge about yourself. Mandela stated, “Discovering who you are and what you want to become is the goal of high school and then taking that understanding to the next level, whether that be furthering your education or going to work.” He believed that working hard to graduate is a goal worth pursuing because it is all about making choices to support your family. According to Mandela, “Family is everything and graduating put a smile in the face of my family.” Barack perceived graduating from high school as a stepping stone to making more money. He stated that “the more you learn, the more you earn. Those are the facts.” He believed graduating was the key that would open up more doors for his dreams and to support his family. Locks believed graduating would give him the confidence to improve his chances of being financially successful and taking care of his family. According to Locks, an academically successful person (i.e., one who graduates from high school) is “someone who can make something of themselves and silence the haters of Black males. Nobody expects us to graduate with a diploma or even consider college. They see us as gang bangers or athletes.” Penny stated, “Most of my people do not have much education, but they see the value in it for me and the better

lifestyle it brings us as a family and for some of us the status.” Jordan summarized the importance of high school graduation as “going where so many other brothers have not. You see all the brothers dropping out of school and finding the street life as a means to elevate themselves.” Mandela shared,

It is not about grades although schools make it the purpose of school. It is about the will to succeed. It is about your motivation and desire to accomplish this life milestone. Many brothers in the community are smart as hell but choose a different path. A path with there is instant rewards and clout.

Heywood defined graduating as hard work, focus, and determination. He understood that academic success is essential to achieve career goals. According to Heywood, “If I did not graduate...I would be another nobody. Another statistic, another one in the community that couldn’t make it.” Heywood emphasized the significance of sports and the sense of belonging, support, and stress relief, stating,

Sport things helped out. Sports are super important to us as they help us to stay off the streets and keep us connected to the school. If you do not get it done in the classroom, you cannot play, which helps with motivation, but even that doesn’t work for all. If we had all our guys playing we’d be awesome but too many can’t play because of grades.

When you’re on a team you have to go to study hall and nobody looks at you any kind of way. You got coaches who care about you and you can get academic support without feeling like you’re slow.

## **Theme #2: I Couldn’t Have Done it Without My Peers**

The researcher examined participants' perceptions on the impact of their peers, family, their community and educators and how they contributed to their academic success. Participants

perceived their peers as highly significant to their academic success as confidantes, and trusted friends who had their back and understood where they came from. Participants perceived parental encouragement and support as crucial to their academic success. All participants expressed that having a support system, which included parent(s) with a strong belief in the value of their academic success, was necessary, even though their schooling experience and education were limited. Participants believed that educators could do more to support their academic aspirations by developing relationships and getting to know them and not putting them in a stereotypical box, and demonstrating greater empathy for their circumstances. "Teachers, principals, staff are supposed to motivate us and inspire us," Mandela said. "We need teachers and principals who believe in us, care about us and inspire us to graduate, but most important is they have to respect us and make us feel like we belong."

All 12 participants stated the significance of their peers and the impact of their influence, which involved motivating one another, having each other's back, and holding them accountable for their goal-setting. Ewing emphasized his trust and confidence in his peer group to keep him focused. Dominique indicated that, without his boys, there would have been no academic success and that their impact is often more significant than their family's or teacher's because they know what they are going through. Dominique shared a story of his peer friendship when they were off track:

I have a friend who is not feeling school. He can't get up for period one and then it just goes downhill from there. I can talk to him brother to brother and get him to rethink his choices. I can do that because he probably did it for me a few months back. We got each other because we live the same thing daily, which can be exhausting. By the way period one is a trap for the guys. They can't get up because they are up late. Schools know this but they start school way too early.

Shaq said,

I think we forget that our parents and elders weren't always into school either. We forget that they have our best interest at heart and only what is good for us, and sometimes that is because they did not get to where they wanted to be and want us to, but because friends are going through it right now and feeling the same pressure and dealing with the same shit as we are every day, it seems real. I don't know a lot of Black people who have had great experiences at school but they still want it for their kid.

According to PG,

Me and my boys had study sessions at ABC Hub. We had food, talked, chilled out, and did some work. We pick each other up and keep focused because we are all trying to graduate and get that paper. We hang out together because we are doing the same thing. If you hang with those that do not have the same goals and ideas for the future, it can turn bad quickly. If you hang with the dudes who are not into school and are outside on the street that can distract and pull you in that direction. My guys are into sports and girls that's our motive so we hang out together and do what we got to do in the classroom.

Anthony believed his peers kept him focused because each had a goal to graduate high school, and it was this "us against the world type of mentality." Kendrick commented, "I listen to my mom, but my friends, we chill every day. We have similar goals: to go to college, make money, care for moms, and do right." He felt his "homies" played the most significant role in his graduation. Overall, participants in this study unanimously supported the belief that their peers had a significant impact on their graduation.



### **Theme #3: I Want to Make My Mom Proud**

Participants in this study revealed that parent(s) who were involved and demonstrated concern in their schooling were a factor in their graduation. Participants reported that parental support and encouragement were welcomed and appreciated as they signaled the value of education and pride in their accomplishments. Additionally, participants noted that parent support inspired them to think beyond graduation and to see the possibilities for a better lifestyle. According to Barack, “I want to make it out of this community. I will never forget my community, but I need some relief from all this shit in this community.” When asked to say more about “this type of community,” he shared,

I see drugs, violence, and messed up shit every day. Around here every day you see something that keeps life real and makes you wonder whether I will make it out of here. It would be nice to live and be elsewhere where you can be safe and just be free of all the nonsense we live with. You see guys just get sucked into all that stuff even when they don't want to cause everyone around them is telling you need the drip, the designer stuff, money, shoes, phones all that stuff that makes you look like a somebody.

Lock's mother supported his academics and extracurricular activities. Lock shared,

My mom has always been there for us and gave us all she could in words and love to encourage us to do our best. She has always been there for us when she is not working. However, she always wanted updates and asked many questions, which told me she cared. I think everyone wants to make their family proud. Around here, there is not that much to feel good about because there are so many distractions, so when you are doing something good, and mom can smile and talk about you with her friends, it feels nice all the way around.

According to Locks, making parents feel heard is important, especially if you want them to be involved at the school. Locks stated,

Parents must feel welcome at the school; none of this fake love stuff, acting like you are listening and caring and then doing the opposite. Moreover, that is what happens, so some parents in this community do not go back to school. They do not feel seen or heard. Make parents feel welcome and an important part of the school, and they will be involved. Moreover, I mean that for all parents, not just the money parents but the poor ones, that look like shit and smell like shit but are still parents and want the best for their children.

Kendrick's mother valued education and was always interested in school-related activities. She demanded that he attend school daily and insisted he stay out of trouble by providing the examples of those who did not and where they are now. Jordan's mother took back-to-school shopping very seriously. She ensured he had the necessary supplies and a home environment that was quiet and free of distractions so he could complete his assignments. She stayed on top of his education, met with teachers, and encouraged homework completion. According to Dominique,

My mom encouraged me daily. She encouraged me to go to school every day. She got me up every morning, gave me something to eat and told me to go to school and focus on my studies and stay away from the drama. Her experience at school was not good, so she tried not to put that on me. I think school hasn't been good for a lot of our parents and they try not to have their experiences rub off into you.

According to Ewing, his mom spoke of the importance of a high school diploma:

My mom is my inspiration. She wanted graduation for me so it became important to me. For me it is essential to go to college because that is my dream. Not sure where the money is coming from for college but I heard there's money out there to support that path.

Shaq's mother constantly told him to keep to himself and stay focused on school and surround himself with friends that are up to good. There is drama if you want it everywhere you turn. She played a significant role in his drive to graduate, which he later came to appreciate. He shared,

She pushed me every day. Yes, it was sometimes annoying, but she would not let me give up. I honestly did not have much of a choice. If I am living under her roof, then graduating is a must. It's all cool now but at the time we were beefing.

#### **Theme # 4: Teachers Need to Get Us and Understand Where We're Coming From**

Participants believed the role of teachers, coaches, principals, and other school staff was to show them love as well as to encourage, support, and motivate them and believe they can graduate. All participants in this study referenced the stereotypes associated with being an African American male and how this can affect their sense of self and motivation to achieve academic success. They felt strongly that teachers and principals should do whatever it takes to create a safe space for African American males by addressing negative stereotypes within the school community. As Barack stated,

Many of my teachers did not expect much from me academically. My college aspirations seemed to be more of a surprise than an expectation or some kind of rude comment about how expensive and hard it is. In other words you're too broke and dumb for college. We have to deal with that in the real world, but in schools? Come on; schools should be free of all that nonsense. They should be trying to lift you up.

According to Ewing,

All the negative stereotypes make us feel a way about what we can and cannot do. The principal should lead the way in dismissing this by ensuring we get the respect we deserve in every classroom. At least let us know we can do this (graduate) and that you believe in

us. You really have to lean on your bros to get through the day, which means cutting yourself off from all the negative crap. Sports takes you away from that and to a place where you feel wanted.

Barack noted, “it would be cool to have more African American principals and teachers out there that get us and know what we deal with away from school.” According to Mandela,

The principal can support us by believing in and getting to know us. Then they will see we are intelligent and ambitious like the other students and have as much potential. I graduated, but that does not mean some of the brothers who did are not just as smart or capable. They just had too much shit going on outside of school and did not have the support to keep school a priority.

Mandela added, “My principal didn’t know your name unless you were in trouble. They didn’t take time to get to know you. Then if you get in trouble they write you off and tell you that will you be like this guy or that guy that's dead or in jail.”

Lock indicated that principals and teachers should inspire and motivate students to realize their potential, inspiring and encouraging African American males would make a difference. He shared,

The only time they talk to you is when you are in trouble or you did something special in the gym. Of course, this means nothing if you do not believe it yourself, because everywhere you go, you hear something else and it usually ain’t good.

Lock added,

Many African American males keep their smarts low-key; it is not cool to be smart. Everyone looks at you differently, like you are a nerd or something. Schools must find a way to change that and acknowledge and give props to the brothers who smash it in the

classroom. Let's keep it real no one gets gassed up for being smart and showing interest in school, so even if that is how you ride, you keep it to yourself or your bros, who feel the same. If schools can change that mindset, that would be helpful. That is why having more educators that look like us is important. And even if you change that inside schools more has to be done to change that kind of mindset in the community.

Jordan would like to see more offerings to support the social emotional well-being of African American males, specifically in their academic pursuits, because their path to graduation is very different. He shared,

We need to form this school brotherhood because it is us again, the world. I like Boys2Men or Becoming A Man programs that support you on being a man. However, you gotta have some black teachers leading that kind of program because chances are they've been through it. I know some people be saying those programs are for the bad kids or the black kids because they need help, which kind of makes you feel shameful. But you go with your boys and let people talk all the mess they want and eat some pizza.

#### **Theme #5: We Need More Teachers Who Look Like Us and Get Us**

Participants voiced the imperative for teachers and staff to show compassion for African American males, which is most effective when teachers understand where they are coming from and the daily challenges they face. Anthony expressed that teachers could support students achieve their potential by believing in them and by instilling confidence. He shared,

I see teachers give up on certain students and try to scare them straight. They probably just need more time so you can give up be positive. If they only knew all the negative voices we hear every day. It's hard to block that out all the time.

Anthony further stated how quick teachers were to “kick disruptive students to the curb” and put them in the hallway instead of finding another way to reach them. The teachers are looking for reasons to kick you out of class and at the time being kicked out seems cool because most of the time class is boring.” According to Anthony,

This does nothing for the student or the others in the class as it sends the wrong message because it is mainly black guys, and the message is that there is no hope for you. You are going nowhere and are a terrible influence on the rest of the class. It always seems like it is only the brothers out in the hallway or being suspended. Schools need to find a way to keep them engaged, not just kick them out of class where they are not learning anything.

I do think part of the problem is what’s being taught...to be honest it is boring as hell. More relevant stuff and hands on learning would probably keep some of those dudes in the hall in the classroom.

Penny commented that teachers who do not get involved with their students outside of the classroom have a more challenging time with them because the students do not feel like they care and are only in it for the check. Penny's advice to teachers is, “get involved, coach a team or do something that shows you care about the kids. Standing there lecturing and judging people just does not cut it. Students see that stuff.” PG stated that some of the teachers at his school have supported him and encouraged him to graduate; he shared,

More teachers that look like us would be huge uplift because they will understand us better and know I cannot say the same for everyone; on the other hand, it is also the way you carry yourself because some teachers want you to succeed more than yourself and bring that love, respect and expectation every day. I have a few teachers like that and I do owe a lot for their support.

Anthony shared the following:

If they would show the same love to us in the classroom that they show on the basketball court that would be crazy. That is why more black teachers who believed in us with none of the fake love bullshit would be insane.

Heywood believed that teachers must be empathetic to the daily grind of African American males' and what they deal with to reach them. According to Heywood,

Some teachers get us and understand where you are coming from, and that is important. We have so much shit going on in our community that takes you away from school. I think more black teachers would help because they probably went through the same stuff to get where they are today. I don't want to sound like there ain't any good white teachers out there that don't care because there are some good ones out there and they are almost always involved in something outside of the classroom that connects them to students.

Penny wants teachers to try different ways to explain school work and give extra help to those in need without judgment. Penny expressed,

Sometimes they want us to sit there and listen and then understand, but sometimes people need to hear it again or differently to understand it. Moreover, you must remember that nobody is going to ask for help most of the time; everyone thinks you are slow if you ask for help or stay after school. School is kind of boring for real. You sit there taking in stuff asking yourself when will I ever need to know this in the real world. More hands on learning programs would be good because it gets hard sitting there listening to a teacher. That is why you need the community to support you as well. Moreover, for some teachers, that works to the teacher's advantage. I taught it, and then I left right after school. Then it is on me if I do not get it.

Penny indicated that he is not perfect and has messed up many, many times. He has nothing but love for his support circle for standing by him when he needed it the most. He shared the following:

My coaches and my family challenging me to be the absolute best that I can. It did get me to where I am today. We all make mistakes, but often, people turn on you when you mess up and when you're black they are expecting you to mess up and then it's see what I mean about those guys. Thank you very much to everyone who never gave up on me.

Ewing felt some teachers wanted him to succeed almost more than himself. He shared, "I can laugh inside when I think about that, but to be honest, not all teachers are like that. Some are real ones." Shaq stated that teachers are there to teach, not make friends, but they still need to focus on what a student needs, which is different for every student. Teachers should "chill out and proceed cautiously, especially when most students are reluctant to ask questions." He perceived that teachers should prioritize connections to students, as that would make African American males feel valued and respected. Most students loathed to ask questions in the classroom and did not want to cause everyone to laugh or think they were slow. Therefore, sitting at the back of the class was a choice made by many African American male students.

**Theme #6: School Has to Be a Place Where You Want to go to Because You Feel Valued, Respected, and Safe**

The participants were adamant about the significance of the schools' sense of belonging and the learning environment, which participants believed is instrumental to improved academic outcomes. They believed that interacting with and being taught by more African American teachers who understood their struggle would inspire them to greater academic success. Locks



thought African American males would achieve their full potential with more teachers that looked them and understood who they are. Locks stated that this will

[i]nspire and motivate students to chase their academic dreams. There have not been many African American teachers during my school career, particularly African American males. Most of us don't have our dad's living with us and don't have a lot of role models to look up to. I am so happy to see Chicago is going to have an African American male mayor and he used to be a teacher. How dope is that? It will be cool if you have someone to look up to because he probably went through the same kind of stuff as me. I think that would be awesome and motivating.

Dominique stated that a positive environment is

free of all the gangs, drugs, and violence because that environment will force students to drop out, which plays a significant role in achieving success and wanting to be at school. So it depends on where you go to school or who is around you and what the vibe is; it affects how you are. Like you are in a safe place with positive energy, you tend to feed off that vibe, and you want to go out there and get it done and make your mom proud. However, if you are in the opposite kind of place with all the violence where people are there to chill with their friends and are not really on the school thing, then there are many problems, and they will probably not graduate. Since they are gang-banging and trapping then, I might slide that way because where you are, affects your sense of direction. It has to be where you want to go because you feel respected. Your friends are there and want to hang with your friends, but you have to feel safe and that's why you need a squad to have your back if anyone wants to mess with you.

According to Barack, a positive, safe school environment that supports recognition of achievement will inspire and motivate American male students' academic achievement. Speaking about his high school, Barack remarked, "The environment is okay. If you walk down the halls, you will see many pictures of athletes, sports stuff, and some academics, so they give you recognition, making you feel nice." Furthermore, Kendrick felt his school recognized student achievement because

You must pass your classes to play on the teams or participate in clubs, and it reminds students to keep their grades up. If your grades are lagging, you cannot play, and that is important to many students to recognize and have your picture on the wall; that spotlight motivates you to study and pass your classes.

Mandela stated that a safe space where students feel respected is necessary for all students to learn, particularly for African American male students, who have often felt detached: "I do not think all African American males go with the flow in their school environment, but let us be real that the type of environment does matter and can pull you towards what your friends are doing, both good and bad." Heywood said his school environment feels safe and chill most of the time: "I mean, I want to be here and feel safe. The fights all end up outside. There is a metal detector, so you cannot bring weapons in even though some have found a way to get them inside." He further stated that he enjoyed giving back to the community through school community service initiatives. Heywood stated,

I get involved with service learning for my community hours. We do community service around the school and community, and it feels good to help in the community. Some people think you are whack for doing that, but that is whatever.

**Theme #7: Stereotypes Affect Your Confidence**

The participants proposed a multitude of issues that they are confronted with that complicates their school engagement, namely the influence that negative stereotypes and images had on their academic success. These images often leave African American males boxed into a particular way of being. As Mandela said,

We are fed daily images through the media and society of who we are supposed to be and it often involves money, women, and bling everywhere. You start thinking that it could be me. Why would I sit in this classroom being bored as hell when I could be doing that kind of stuff.

According to Kendrick, all the negative vibes around African American males does affect you. Kendrick stated,

We get no respect they are always talking trash about us and gets in your head. People always look scared around us, like we are going to do them harm.

Additionally, PG asserted that if African American male students are shown some academic love, and are worthy or capable students, they begin to take on that persona. According to PG,

I think all that negative noise affects your self-esteem. It's a lot to have to fight through this stuff every day without my guys I would have quit a long time ago.

**Theme #8: The Community Can Do More to Support Us**

The participants reported that community initiatives to support and prioritize education would send a strong message to African American males. Whether it is tutoring, mentoring, job shadowing or even the necessary step of establishing curfews to deter violence and drug activities. Kendrick perceived the community needs to do more to curve the street life. Community elders can educate African American males about the street life. According to

Kendrick, “The community is almost silent in regards to academics and that silence says a lot about whether education is valued.” Locks shared:

You get gassed up for sports not so much for academics. Those are the facts in this community. I think the community ain’t showing up to the science fair like they are the ball game.

Participants argued that the community needs to invest in more opportunities to address the allure of the street life, which takes over too many African American males especially at night. Both Dominique and PG share that many African American males are outside because there’s not enough to do inside. Outside is exciting as shit. There’s always something happening, but like my mama says ain’t nothing good happening after dark on them streets.”

As Shaq shared,

You see all the black guys who are out there on the streets getting clout for wearing designer or whatever. Most of them probably dropped out. They are making money on the street and trying to help their moms out.

Shaq suggested, “honestly get off your phone and take some notes. The teachers tell you what will be on the test but everyone be on their phones and some teachers don’t care and then they say I told you so.” Participants suggested to embrace a culture of academic success you have to have the right mindset; believe in us and that Black kids are smart and can learn like any other students. The right mindset would also include being a life-long learner who understands the background of his/her students. Support positive Black identity: African American males are inundated with messages that they are lazy, worthless, violent, achieve less, and that only the exceptional Black person can graduate. Be intentional in creating safe spaces where African American males feel valued and respected. Check any stereotypes you might have at the door.

Whatever stereotypes you may have do not place the students in a box as that curbs their growth and limits their untapped potential. Educators have a crucial role in countering the daily negative messages African American males receive.

### **Theme #9: Academic Success Is Up to You As Well**

A number of participants expressed the belief that African American males were obligated to step up and own their school journey. Anthony and Jordan believed in the motto "you work hard and play hard," and surround yourself with people that are for you and not against you with similar beliefs and values. Don't get it twisted though believing in yourself is tough when you got people telling you otherwise all the time. You have to ignore the noise and walk tall. What worked for PG was studying with friends. He found it difficult going it alone, but he was interested and keen to learn when engaged in a study group or study hall. Jordan emphasized that being organized being disciplined and hard work is his formula for success.

Overall, all participants felt academic success was a shared responsibility and believed they can't do it alone, but with a network of support from the school, to the community to the home. African American males can and will be successful. As one participant stated, "I didn't get here on my own. I was wrapped in support from teachers, coaches, friends and my family. Love to them all."

### **Theme # 10: Being an African American Male Is a Daily Struggle**

All the participants expressed societal, academic, and personal struggles while growing up African American, being a male, and attending high school. A few of the participants expressed the roughness of growing up African American. Jordan explained, "I can understand it will be rough, but the path for Black men is different from any other race. It is 100 times harder than any other race." Dominique indicated, "It is rough growing up a Black man. It is soul-

destroying all the time. It is just not fair.” PG highlighted, “Being African American male is like going uphill for everything, but the incentive to that is in the end, once you get your goals accomplished, you know nothing can stop you.” Some participants specified that they had to endure stereotypical attitudes from others that underestimated their potential. Barack stated, “We always get stereotyped. The things we say, the things we wear, our culture— everyone is always looking at us.” Jordan explained that it is always what you did, rather than how you are doing:

It is always a struggle. That is the reality of being Black. Everyone has a stereotype of us.

You do not know a person until you speak to them. I cannot say every person is a hater, but most of the time they already have a story about the Black male and it’s never good.

The participants unanimously indicated that being a Black male is “deflating.” Heywood stated that living as an African American male can be challenging. Heywood shared, “People already believe that we cannot achieve anything or are up to no good. If I do not make it, I will not have a chance at a good life. It is a struggle.” Penny pointed out,

I do not know why life has to be so rough for Black men. I mean, what did we do? Be born Black? Is that such a crime? Life is not fair to Black men. I have always struggled. My Black friends have always struggled. My family members have done nothing but struggle. It is like it is never going to end. That is why I graduated and want to go to college. I do not want to struggle anymore.

Lock’s experience was similar to that of Jordan, as he grew up around gangs and community violence. Lock indicated,

It was kind of rough. It was a challenging experience growing up where I was. Where I come from, you are either hustling, playing sports, making music, or trapping. I have seen it all, deaths in front of me, drugs everywhere, violence, and much hate.

Participants expressed their struggles and challenges with being an African American male at school. PG indicated,

It is difficult because everyone sees us as a threat, and we are treated as such. Walking in the community or at school, people, students, and teachers avoid you out of fear. We are not even a threat. We are here to get our education just like everyone else. I have thought about dropping out and just getting a job.

Kendrick added that, during his final semester, he encountered extreme difficulty as the work was hard. "I had a teacher that never taught, just talked and passed out a test every two weeks. You will feel that no one at school wants to see you succeed, but you have to keep pushing." He continued, sharing, "I feel some teachers do not like me because I am Black. I have not done anything; I'm just Black. A few of the participants spoke about academic struggles." Mandela stated, "You have to fight harder than most for what you want. When you do not understand the work, some people are not willing to help. It's a lot of work, so you must make time for it." Heywood felt as though, "some of my teachers failed me. I hate asking people for help, so it was hard for me to ask my teachers for help. I just tried to figure out the work the best that I could." He continued, sharing, "When I couldn't understand it, I asked anyone but the people who were supposed to help. I just couldn't bring myself to ask for help, because some teachers looked down on me like you were dumb. I like when we worked in groups or on a project and as a group we could help each other. I would rather ask someone in the group than some of my teachers."

Some participants expressed that their high school experience was stressful. Penny stated, "It is already rough being an African American male. High School has been very stressful. It has been rough." Mandela added, "It is hard for us African Americans already, so I do not understand why some teachers have to make it more stressful. It is not correct."

### **Theme #11: Support from Coaches, Peers, and Community Matters**

The social support needed to support African American males was referenced several times. The participants who participated in sports expressed gratitude for having support from their coaches and teammates. PG stated, “My teammates have been supportive. I could not do this without them.” Dominique stated, “Our coaches talk daily about being careful about what we do and say. I appreciate them for that.” Penny indicated, “My teammates have been a big help to me. I appreciate all that they have done for me. I would not have graduated without them.” Penny added, “Coach has been a big help with everything. Without guys like this, I am not sure what happens to me. Maybe I would be working a regular job trying to get it on my own.” The participants expressed appreciation for the support they received from these programs. Anthony pointed out, “The B2M program has saved my life, and I appreciate all the support I have received from the brotherhood!” Kendrick added, “The ABC Community Hub has been my biggest support. I appreciate all the love they have shown to me.” Shaq stated,

My circle is small, and I do not trust everyone, so I appreciate the support that I receive from them. Without them, I probably would not have graduated. We support each other. We got each other’s back.

Penny added,

My teammates have been helpful. Having friends makes you feel more comfortable on the team that are going through what I am going through. Strong relationships are built off that. We all know what we are going through and have been through some tough times. We are here for each other. I am glad that I have them.

A few participants indicated that they would not be able to make it without the support of their friends. One participant explained that he needed support from tutors because he had



difficulty understanding his teachers, sharing, “The teachers do not teach you like they are supposed to. They think you are supposed to understand everything because you are a senior. However, I don't, so tutoring has helped me a lot.” A few of the participants specified the importance of having access to tutors. Mandela expressed that ABC Community Hub lets students print papers for free and match you with a learning partner. According to Mandela,

I also go there for study hall. Being at home is hard for me to study, so I need to put myself in a situation to study. That is why I go to the ABC Community Hub, and we are required to go 3-4 times a week.

Heywood explained that he goes to ABC because there is peace there and because he can receive help from tutors: “There are other resources, such as rooms, printing, and food, you can access while you are in there. That way, we can get the help we need and not be stressed with all the other stuff going on. We need that kind of support on every block. The problem is getting there because there's always something happening on the streets that looks kind of interesting.”

### **Theme # 12: School Is My Way Out**

All participants expressed that they grew up in the hood and that graduating from high school was something they did to improve themselves. Penny stated, “In my community, there is not much to do, so I had to play sports.” Heywood indicated, “I messed up my freshmen year in high school, and I wanted to redeem myself. I am glad I got it straight and graduated, and I will do something with this opportunity.” Kendrick added, “My family is not well off. . . . I wanted to get away from where I came from. . . . It was my motivation to prepare me for college.” Mandela specified, “I believe I had no other option but to go to school to do right by me and mom. There's not a lot of college bound students from here. It would be cool to be the next one.”

The participants indicated that they wanted to get out of their dire situations and wanted better for themselves. Jordan stated that graduating from high school was his way out: “Nothing was going on in my block, especially nothing positive. I could not wait to graduate high school and improve my life. I am thankful for the community, but it is not what I want in my future.” Mandela added, “I wanted more in life. I wanted to get out of my situation, so I worked hard to get here.” PG indicated, “I want to be somebody. I wanted more for myself. I always knew that I would be somebody regardless of my situation.”

One participant expressed that he wanted to get away from the hood life of his neighborhood and achieve success. Dominique explained,

I wanted better for myself. I wanted to get out of the hood. There is nothing there. No one really from the hood makes it to college. This is for my mom.

Two participants said they worked hard to graduate so they could be the first in the family. Shaq pointed out that his mom and dad did not go to college:

Not many people around here finish school. I just wanted to be him. I want to buy my mom nice stuff for all her hard work taking care of my brothers, sisters and me. I want better for myself and for my family.

Ewing added, “not that many brothers graduate high school and even go to college. I want to shut up everyone who said I couldn’t do it, that motivated me to get up out of here.”

The goal of chapter four was to delineate the understandings that transpired from the information acquired from 12 recent African American male high school graduates at northern Chicago high schools through interviews. The researcher noted common themes that related to the strategies that contributed to the participants’ high school graduation. Success for the participants meant graduating from high school, learning to earn, making their family proud, and

being motivated and focused. Contributing factors of participants' academic success included parent and peer support, being seen, heard, understood and belief in their academic ability, caring effective teachers and principals, and a safe and a welcoming learning environment. Challenges to participants' academic success included negative typecast of African American males, limited community engagement, environmental distractions, which included living in an under resourced community, peer group pressure, and unresponsive schools and staff.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 included responses from the participant interviews in response to this study's research question. The 12 participants provided perceptions regarding their experiences of being African American male high school graduates. A unanimous voice among the participants echoed their struggles of being African American males. Research Question 1 asked about the strategies that contributed to their academic success. The findings revealed that they overcame barriers and endured stereotypes, but stayed focused on the goal of graduating. The participants expressed their difficulties balancing their African American male status and their day-to-day circumstances in the community. The findings also showed that those who participated in sports had support from their coaches and teammates, which was beneficial throughout their high school journeys. The ABC Community Hub was their primary source of academic support, especially from tutors, and the provision of a distraction-free safe space.

In conclusion, each participant in this study expressed the struggles of being an African American male. They endured hardships and stress with navigating high school because of their status. In Chapter 5, the researcher presents the significant findings, interpretations, and ramifications for future research.

## Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

*What specific strategies contribute to improved graduation rates in African American males in northern Chicago high schools?* This was the guiding research question. The researcher utilized a qualitative methodology and conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 African American males who recently graduated from a northern Chicago high school. The researcher posted a recruitment flyer at the ABC Community Hub to gain participants. From the returned consent, 12 African American males were selected as subjects for the study. Each interview comprised 16 questions, including follow-up questions when necessary, to garner further insights. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for factors supporting their academic performance. The participants and the schools they attended were protected by the use of pseudonyms.

Each interview began with a word of congratulations from the researcher on graduating from high school and achieving academic success. The participants related academic success (i.e., graduating) with working to make a better life and achieving a goal. Participants' responses centered around graduating as a pathway to success. Academic success was defined as graduating as a path to overall life success and enhanced opportunities to improve life circumstances. This discovery supports other research studies that confirm that African American males view high school graduation as a learn to earn imperative (Alfieri, 2019; Challenger et al., 2020). All participants believed that high school graduation was a necessary step to improve their earning potential. All the participants had a sense of accomplishment for achieving the goal of graduation. Participants believed having a laser-like focus on school and surrounding themselves with positive peers were critical to their success, which confirms prior research

studies that African American males want to graduate while overcoming unflattering stereotypes that have rattled their confidence (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Nance, 2017). Graduation was the students' main goal in terms of obtaining academic success, but, frequently, confronting roadblocks was challenging (Buckley, 2018; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Morgan et al., 2017). Participants recognized the inner drive and self-motivation required to meet their academic goals and the opportunity to escape their current environment and attain financial success. However, others believed graduating would elevate them to achieve a milestone that their parents did not, which was also a motivating factor. Research confirms that African American males that graduated had attained the skill and will that contributed to their educational attainment (de Silva et al., 2018).

The researcher wanted to know the role parents, peers, and teaching and learning staff play in the journey to high school graduation of the participants'. Prior research has established that African American males associate their classroom performance to encouraging staff, attentive parents and peers, a positive and safe learning environment and their will to succeed (Epstein, 2018; Hardaway et al., 2020). Participants in the current study believed that effective teachers should care about them, reach, teach and motivate them to achieve academic success and believe in their academic ability. The African American male participants further reported how important this support was to their academic success; however, it was not a constant in their schooling experience. Furthermore, the participants reported that having a relationship akin to brotherhood with their peers was really impactful. In some instances, peer advice was taken and received before parental and family advice because of the relatability of their peers. These findings aligned with prior research, which emphasize the advantageous effect of same-race friend group relationships and support, which affects their classroom performance (Buckley,

2018; Warren, 2016). These studies showed that peer relationships are indispensable to African American males' educational attainment.

Furthermore, same-race peer relationships and support boosted the schooling experience for African American males and their focus on school (Buckley, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). Furthermore, participants recognized that a positive peer environment promoting academic success was a choice, as the opposite was readily available. They developed relationships with like-minded peers who supported and encouraged them as they shared similar goals. Their relationships with peers who valued academic success and graduating from high school helped the participants maintain a positive outlook. These findings aligned with Buckley's (2018) research, as the author stated that peers have a potent influence on African American male students.

Participants acknowledged the positive connection between parental support on their academic success, which supports prior studies that found African American male students performed well academically when parents showed support and encouragement (Coleman et al., 2019; Gonzales & Gabel, 2017; Lee & Rispoli, 2019). Ninety percent of participants in this study grew up in a single-parent household, where the merit of education was stressed through words, deeds and expectations. Curtis et al. (2017) found the impact of parental involvement to be substantial, as it leads to improved engagement and performance for African American males. These findings support Lemmons and Johnson's (2019) research, which confirmed that African American male students improved learning outcomes, when parents were involved and demonstrated emotional support and encouragement. Although 90% of participants in this study lived in a single-parent household, their academic aspirations still remained. The parent(s) were praised for checking in with them despite work schedules and taking care of other siblings. When

parents encouraged, reinforced and, sometimes, demanded a focused approach to school, this involvement made a difference in the students' desire to graduate. Furthermore, participants did not feel pressure to graduate; instead, they appreciated their parents' expectations to graduate. The African American males in this study affirmed the positive impact of parents in educational attainment with regards to encouragement, expectation, support and focus on graduating.

Schools must continue to seek out new and creative ways to involve African American parents' in their children's schooling. Parental involvement is a factor in the educational attainment of African American males. Studies on the role of educators highlights the necessity for African American male students to be seen, heard and understood (Carnoy & García, 2017; Clio et al., 2021). The participants concurred with researchers (Anderson, 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018) that educators must know and understand the diversity of the students they teach to establish meaningful instructional relationships that meet their needs with high expectations. Overall, participants in this study wanted to believe wholeheartedly that graduating would set them up for future economic success with the will and skill to chase their dreams. This is important because of the existing narrative that too many African American males leave or are pushed out of school and are ill-prepared without the life and academic skills to flourish.

Issues of race are paramount in the schooling experience of African American male students (Dumas & Nelson, 2017; Ferguson, 2020; Hotchkins, 2016; Russell-Brown, 2019). The study participants articulated the need and concern for more staff that looked like them, and expressed the joy of being taught by someone who looked like them and understood the challenges that African American males face. The findings mirror the literature, which states that positive self-identity positively impacts African American males' academic achievement and attitude toward school (Crocetti, 2017; Ellis et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). According to the

participants, the principal has a critical role in recruiting African American male staff who can mentor, motivate and be a role model for young African American males.

Furthermore, the participants articulated that the principal was responsible for developing a positive school climate for African American males, where they feel valued and respected. The principal should also be willing and able to address the typecasting of African American males as “gang bangers” and thugs, supported in prior studies where African American males are often portrayed as dumb, lazy, and aggressive. Research has shown that these stereotypes, unless addressed at the school level, can affect African American males' academic performance (Appel & Weber, 2017; Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Tella, 2017). Stereotypes are seen by the subjects as having a detrimental effect on their schooling experience, which affects their mindset and diminishes their desire to continue with school. Because of these societal stereotypes placed on African American males, this population may feel inferior to their peers and may perceive that more pressure is placed on them to succeed academically.

If academic success is illusive, some African American males may become defeated and choose another pathway, such as sports, because they see others who look like them achieve success in the gym. A handful of participants explained that a societal expectation exists that encourages African American males to be athletic but not academic, which makes many African American males focus their effort in the gym. These findings support Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who noted that some African American males channel their time, energy and effort in areas that boosted their status.

Based on the findings in this study, participants concluded teachers must have a compassionate and understanding frame of mind. Teachers should use multiple strategies to support students' grasp of the lesson and the practical application as all students learn in different



ways. The most effective teachers are the ones who are willing to come in before and after school to support student success and demonstrate care and encouragement for all students. This finding supports prior research stating that empathetic and supportive teachers, who believed in the ability of all students influenced the educational outcomes of African American male students (Rhoden, 2017). Participants believed teachers who were present and involved in before and after school activities were able to build relationships with students that resulted in less discipline issues than those encountered by other teachers. These findings confirm prior researchers who noted that African American male students enrolled in effective schools would have improved academic outcomes (Brooms, 2017; Pinkard et al., 2017).

Brooms (2020) noted that teachers must customize African American male students' needs by differentiating the support and personalizing instructional strategies to engage all learners. African American male students from this study shared the need for effective teachers that care, instead of being pushed to special education to be academically successful. This finding aligned with the research by Brooms (2020) and Mary et al. (2018), who revealed that African American males performed well in the classroom when they had positive relationships with their teachers, who supported them, believed in them and had high expectation for them.

Study participants believed that when African American males are grappling with learning, teachers need to utilize another strategy in a way that is supportive and caring and without judgement. Teachers must form a deep connection to them and be aware of all pros and cons of the community. The study's results emphasized the need for teachers to be informed of the daily tensions African American males' experience, as participants revealed teachers are often unsympathetic and/or lack empathy. This disconnect often leads teachers to presume that African American male students are rowdy, loud and disinterested in learning. The participants perceived

that teachers must change up the curriculum to make it more relevant to African American males' realities and find creative strategies to keep all students engaged in learning. These findings support prior studies and the significance of effective classroom practices to promote a classroom climate of high expectations that is safe and engaging, which includes using alternative strategies to expulsion and suspension for disruptive students (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019).

When the school environment mirrors the makeup of the student population and creates a sense of belonging, students are more likely to benefit from their schooling experience. The findings in this study disclosed that participants long for a safe space, and believed that this kind of environment had a far reaching impact on their classroom learning and focus. This supports the claim that African American males performed best in a safe, welcoming, and engaging environment (Elston, 2020; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). The participants believed that educators should celebrate and acknowledge students for their academic achievement and engagement. These findings support prior research and the significance of school environment on African American male students' classroom performance (Hung et al., 2020; Robinson, 2017).

Participants shared the barriers they face in achieving academic success in today's society, which rocked their belief in, connection, and sense of commitment to school. This finding aligns with Johnson-Staub (2017), who suggested that the disconnect for African American males and school starts as early as kindergarten and continues as they make their way through the school system. Participants emphasized the need for educators to understand their lives outside of school to personalize the necessary support to achieve academic success. Additionally, the participants discussed the limited community initiatives and engagement in addressing how to keep African American males off the streets as a crucial part of the challenge.

African American males defined academic success as graduating from high school, moving onward and upward from their home community, making their mother proud, and understanding the challenges they overcame against all odds. Participants shared resiliency, agency, and an awareness that too many peers and loved ones are dead or in jail. All participants expressed love and gratitude towards their mothers and their unconditional support. In this qualitative study, the participants' perspective was viewed through critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theory provided a way for African American male graduates to use counter-narratives to find and express their inner voices (Hiraldo, 2010; Milner, 2008; Sandals, 2020).

Racism and counter-story telling were common principles of critical race theory in this study and served as a bedrock of how the participants conceived of their journey to high school graduation (Ladson-Billings, 2018). The African American males associated with this study perceived racism as an impediment to academic attainment, particularly in regard to expectations and stereotypes. The participants felt as though they were spotlighted due to their race, which had far-reaching ramifications for how they are viewed by others. These beliefs often give onto bias, cynicism, discouraging staff, and isolation in the classroom. Many participants gave shared stories of teachers who perceived them or same-race peers as low achieving and disengaged learners with little or no academic interest.

Moreover, the participants shared the concern that bias was so widespread in their daily interface at school that their coping strategy is to disengage, or retreat to their friend group for support, which eventually may impact their school experience. Participants addressed the misconception that African American males lack the necessary skill and will to perform in the classroom. The participants sustained a positive upbeat outlook despite daily flagrant attacks on

their African American male status; a positive energy that came from their peer group, sports participation, and family. All participants demonstrated a relentless focus to graduate from high school to silence the naysayers. There was a widely held belief that society did not expect them to graduate, but they sought to achieve this goal for their family and for self-gratification.

Relationships, expectations, and stereotypes influenced how discipline policies and classroom learning were addressed. For example, Barack and Lock felt like they were under surveillance inside and outside of school. The participants voiced concern that people develop their views of African American males based on outdated and biased images in the media. This view is consistent with research that states that African American males are portrayed unfavorably on news and entertainment programs, which can escalate racial stereotypes (Baldrige, 2017). Because of this implicit bias, teachers and school staff often keep them boxed into who they think they are as learners and citizens. Overall, the participants in this study credited their graduation status to a safe space, resilience, parental and peer support, and caring educators/coaches.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A study's limitations are weaknesses over which the researcher has no control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Due to the study's small sample size, the findings are not discernible to other high school students. The research is limited to 12 individuals' perceived experiences that contributed to their academic attainment. An additional limitation is the geographic location of North Chicago, Illinois. The findings are not generalizable to other high schools within the Chicago area.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The strategies ascertained in this research were gathered from the insights of recent African American male graduates in northern Chicago. The findings from this study provide evidence that may be useful in determining how to support African American males' educational attainment. This research might be useful for comprehensive dialogue around African American male student success in Chicago high schools, as providing a counter-narrative for African American male students and staff is essential. Further, relevant resources, both material and human, must be allocated with the specific needs of African American males in mind. This alignment could improve graduation rate and the preparation of students for school and career options. Public high schools must deepen the understanding of African American male students by amplifying their voices so that they can identify what is needed to enhance their success. These strategies could benefit African American males' engagement, persistence, and graduation rates.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The data from this study may provide information to educators, policymakers, parents, and the community regarding the improvement of educational outcomes for African American males. Furthermore, it could provide a deeper understanding of what it will take to improve the academic outcomes of African American males (Dixson, 2017; Linwood et al., 2020). Further, the results may also help African American males and other racialized students improve graduation rates and outcomes. (Bush & Bush, 2020; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2017). Recommendations from the study may significantly impact the graduation rates of African American males in northern Chicago, as well as offer a grasp of interventions needed to support African American males (Kempf, 2020). Further, the findings may lead to a heightened

awareness of the allocation of resources to improve the academic outcomes of young African American males.

### **Recommendations for Action**

In this phenomenological research study, the researcher aimed to uncover the strategies that have contributed to the educational attainment of recent African American male graduates. The researcher's first recommendation is to hire more African American male teachers. An apparent concern for the study participants' was the absence of African American male staff specifically, and teaching, learning and administrative staff generally. Same race teachers in the early grades are related with lower rates of high school graduation and increased rates of college admissions for Black students (Gershenson et al., 2022). These results are particularly relevant to Black boys who are defined as "at risk" coming from under resourced communities during their elementary years. The merit of having African American male staff interact, with motivate, inspire and uplift Black male students has been probed over the years. Education systems must be intentional in enlisting a diverse cadre of teaching and learning staff in general and specifically African American male teachers with regards to this study. African American staff may impact students holistically, serving as mentors and role models.

The second recommendation is to create a sanctuary. The participants in this study emphasized the significance of having a safe haven where they are seen and heard, starting early and often. This initiative can focus on building capacity led and supported by African American male staff and male peers. African American male students may feel a greater sense of belonging and safe to develop and nurture relationships with African American male staff and peers.

The researcher's third recommendation is to create an African American male high school graduate network. African American male leadership and brilliance must become the standard,

woven throughout the school system. The network may be developed by including currently enrolled African American male students and alums to pull others through to graduation. The network could provide a network of counsel, support and mentorship championing African American male students as they make their way through high school. The leadership network could provide support leadership and career exploration, and ultimately develop counter-narratives for the African American high school experience.

The researcher's fourth recommendation for practice includes supporting mothers parenting young Black males in urban America (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). This study's results indicate an urgent necessity for community and school programs in urban communities to support Black mothers raising their Black male sons alone. Discourse between single Black mothers on parenting their sons should be encouraged and given a platform so they can provide support to their peers and share parenting experiences (Warner, 2020).

The fifth recommendation for practice is to educate the African American community regarding young Black males' mental health needs in urban communities (Fripp & Carlson, 2017). The findings showed that young African American males are exposed to daily microaggressions that impact how they navigate their lives. The research indicates that addressing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and promoting healthy socioemotional development in young African American males are linked with better life outcomes (Motley & Banks, 2018).

Based on this study's findings, the sixth recommendation for practice is to develop mentorship programs and facilitate positive mentorships in urban communities. The African American mentorship literature is clear that young African American males need healthy mentorships that provide healthy models of "healthy lifestyles, safety and structure, and strong

families” (Booker & Brevard, 2017). Facilitating mentorships within the community can help young Black youth observe successful people that look like them in their communities (Ehlen, 2017). Additionally, an essential characteristic of every school is the establishment of a culture of respect and caring. Focus on building caring relationships between and among students, staff and parents in each school. Is there a village in your school?

The seventh recommendation for practice is to develop and create a welcoming and positive environment. Establishing a welcoming atmosphere for young African American males gives them a sense of acceptance within the learning environment. This will allow the students in question to engage in their learning, as they will not be bothered by the premise of having to fight for their acceptance. Finally, the eighth recommendation for practice is to develop and foster positive relationships with students, their families, the community, and the school, all of which are critical in fueling successful teaching and learning among African American males. This will help nurture the students and enable them to navigate the challenges they encounter during the learning process.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Until African American males' graduation rates are comparable to their peers, a laser-like focus on African American male student success is imperative. Therefore, future research must contribute to the scholarship on how to boost the educational attainment of African American male students. The following suggestions are recommended as future research opportunities. Researchers may seek to understand who African American males want to become, where they are seen and heard and treated with dignity. Students must feel a strong sense of belonging, which appeared to be particularly important to the study participants. Belonging is so critical that it may ultimately affect a student's achievement, aspirations, and retention. Therefore, it is essential



for students to find the space and place to learn and grow, while having a non-judgmental, uplifting learning experience.

Further, there is little research that explains the contrast of African American males and African American females, even though females are raised in comparable circumstances to their male peers. They are both subject to the same demographic and geographic contexts; yet, Black females tend to carry on and overcome, graduating at higher rates than African American males. Therefore, conducting a study on African American females would allow for a rigorous expansive analysis of contributing factors on the educational attainment of African American males.

Further research may examine African American males who did not graduate or were pushed out of high school, to compare the perceptions of African American male graduates. This research could provide further analysis on the underwhelming classroom performance of African American males. This study may provide information on the power of the mindset needed for African American male students to succeed and what factors they consider as contributing to their academic outcomes. Another recommendation is to assess the results of community engagement and investments to support the improved educational outcomes of African American males. Community leaders could utilize further research to launch initiatives that are customized to support the needs of African American males.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological research study examined the strategies that supported the improved educational outcomes of African American males. The findings of this study proposed that African American males, who graduated ascribe their success to peer support, family

support, caring teachers, coaches and resilience. These wrap-around sources of encouragement helps them conquer the ever present obstacles to their school educational attainment. It is imperative to continue to seek out insights on how to advance the African American male educational attainment agenda. This a problem that continues to exist and persist, African American males graduation rates still lag behind their counterparts at an alarming rate. This problem is widespread throughout their learning experiences and society at large. Educators are obligated to provide all students the opportunity to be seen and heard in welcoming, engaging, safe environments where they are expected to achieve.

In Chapter 5, the researcher presented the findings and discussed how the results correlate to the literature, as well as the framework, discussion, and conclusion. The social impact of this study is that it may contribute to social change, supporting school engagement and improvement of the graduation rates of African American males. It is imperative that school systems continue to explore alternative strategies that meet the learning needs of all learners. The academic challenges that African American males face are embedded in a misunderstanding of their background; and negative stereotypes in and outside of the school. Educators must be aware of these challenges to blaze a trail forward that will lead to improved graduation rates among African American males. To the researcher, the complexity of improving academic success as it rest on educators becomes one of developing a strong sense of belonging to encourage academic engagement and transmit care and hope to African American male students. This researcher found the participants in this study to be thoughtful of their schooling experience and able to identify strategies that contributed to their own success. The unpacking of the insights articulated by the participants in this study can be an impetus for educators in their quest to support all students improve educational attainment.

Therefore, future research may provide educators with additional strategies, insights and approaches from the voices of African American males on how to improve graduation rates.

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### Appendix A: Letter to ABC Community Hub Research Study

I am asking the ABC community Hub to participate in a research study titled –To Be Seen and Heard: Strategies that Impact the Academic Success of African American Males in Northern Chicago High Schools. This study is led by researcher Christopher. This qualitative research study will focus on the strategies that contributed to African American males' academic success.

Five-year graduation rates at Chicago schools have risen for all ethnic groups (Casey Foundation, 2021). While this rise is a positive sign for Chicago area students, African American male graduation rates are not tracking at the same pace (Koumpilova, 2021). The purpose of this study is to identify strategies that contributed to the increase in graduation rates that could directly impact future African American males' graduation goals in northern Chicago high schools (Carey, 2019).

I invite you to get involved in this research study because the ABC Community Hub is a meeting place for African American males in Northern Chicago and is accessed by them for the services and support.

I plan to interview twelve African American males 18-20 years of age that are recent graduates and are connected to the ABC Community Hub. The study will focus on strategies that contributed to their academic success. Research is limited in this area; thus, this study will build upon the current literature and provide evidence of effective practices that can serve as a foundation for future research in public high schools.

I am asking the ABC community Hub to post the recruitment flyer on their message board and provide a quiet space to conduct the interviews.

Information from this study may benefit other African American male students who serve similar students and face similar educational challenges nationwide. In addition, by presenting a set of successful strategies and practices, such insights could guide the development of education policies and refine high school practices that are aligned with the vision of raising Black male achievement and closing the achievement gap.

Confidentiality of the study's participants is central to ethical research practice and is an obligation to the researcher. The researcher does not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Therefore, the identity of the participants will be kept anonymous and controlled, in accordance with the ethical standards and protocols established. All participants will be de-identified by pseudonyms in the findings and discussion sections of the dissertation. The results of this research study will be presented to community stakeholders. Christopher Spence Cell: (847) 730-7917 cms.live07@gmail.com

Sincerely, Christopher Spence

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

### Volunteers Needed To Be Seen and Heard



The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify strategies that contributed to the academic success of African American male students. Identifying strategies that have caused an increase in graduations during the last five years could help continue the trend of increased graduation rates for African American males in northern Chicago schools.

Snacks and refreshments will be provided.



#### Location

- ABC Community Hub  
Chicago, Illinois

#### Are you eligible?

- African American Male
- 18-20 years old
- Recent graduate

If you're unsure if you meet the requirements, call or email a member of the study team:

- Christopher Spence  
847 730 7917

## Appendix C: Demographic Profile

Name:

Age:

Gender:

African American    Yes    No

Phone Number:

Mailing Address:

Email Address:

High School Attended:

Year Graduated:

Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your mother:

High School/GED    Some College    Associate Degree/ Bachelor Degree or Higher

Not sure

Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your father:

High School/GED    Some College    Associate Degree/ Bachelor Degree or Higher

Not sure

## Appendix D: Consent Form

Dear Participant

You are invited to take part in a research study titled *To Be Seen and Heard: Strategies that Support the Academic Success of African Males in Northern Chicago High Schools*. This study is being conducted by researcher Christopher Spence. Research gathered in this study will be used to explore strategies that contributed to the academic success of African American males.

**Background Information:** Five year graduation rates at Chicago schools have risen for all ethnic groups (Casey Foundation, 2021). While this rise is a positive sign for Chicago area students, African American male graduation rates are not tracking at the same pace (Koumpilova, 2021). The purpose of this study is to identify strategies that contributed to the increase in graduation rates that could directly impact future African American males' graduation goals in northern Chicago high schools (Carey, 2019).

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an open-ended semi-structured interview conducted face-to-face at the ABC Community Hub.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. Therefore you can cease to participate at any given time without judgement. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:** Participation in the study will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete and will involve discussing strategies that contributed to your academic success with the researcher. The potential significance of the research is that the identified strategies can be shared with other students, teachers,

administrators, parents, policymakers, and community leaders to assist future African American male students in reaching the goal of high school graduation.

Compensation: You will not receive any compensation for being in this research study.

Confidentiality: Any information you provide will be entirely confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study.

Contacts and Questions: You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via telephone at 1 (8477307917) or email [cms.live07@gmail.com](mailto:cms.live07@gmail.com).



### Statement of Consent

I have read the above information, and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I agree to the terms described above.

Print Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date of consent \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Written or Electronic Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher's  
written \_\_\_\_\_

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

### Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your experiences through school?
1. How would you describe strategies you used in meeting your personal academic goals.
2. What one strategy do you think was the most important in meeting your academic goals?
3. What strategies would you like to share with your peers to assist them in meeting their academic goals?
4. What strategies were taught or shared for academic success by teachers, coaches, or other education personnel?
5. What strategies did your peers share that helped in meeting your academic goals?
6. What strategies were taught by your parents or guardians?
7. What are your suggestions or strategies for other students to overcome challenges to accomplish academic success?
8. What are your suggestions or strategies for other students to overcome challenges for accomplishing academic success?
9. What do you think are some of the reasons some African American males have successful school experiences?
10. Name the people who have had the most influence on your academic career, and how did they influence your academic success?
11. What are some challenges you faced in high school, and how did you handle those challenges?
12. How do you solve your problems in your personal life? How do you solve problems at school?

13. What advice would you offer me, the researcher, in assisting other African American males to be academically successful?

14. What advice would you offer high schools to increase the school success of African American males?