

TEACHERS' PRACTICES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE  
SUCCESS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

by

MONTAURIUS B. ABNER

ROXANNE MITCHELL, COMMITTEE CHAIR  
BECKY ATKINSON  
PHILO HUTCHESON  
JINGPING SUN  
ANDRE P. SAULSBERRY

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## ABSTRACT

African American male students continue to fail at overwhelming rates in America's public schools. This is not a new problem; however, such continued failure cannot be ignored. The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The study was designed as a qualitative study, using culturally relevant pedagogy as a conceptual framework, to explore students' and teachers' perspective about effective teacher practices. To establish an understanding of what teachers are doing to help students be successful in high school and beyond, a practical qualitative study of teachers and their practices and students and their experiences was conducted. This study was guided by three research questions: 1) What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to school achievement? (2) What are the teachers' practices that teachers say contribute to African American male school achievement? and (3) How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and the teachers they identify as successful?

Furthermore, the research examined Ladson-Billings criterion for culturally relevant teaching and evidence of it through the themes that emerged from data analysis. Four schools from three districts located in central Alabama were selected for the study. The participants in this study were selected by the principals and/or guidance counselors from the four schools and were eight former high school students and seven teachers identified by participating students. Data were collected primarily through interviews. The study findings showed how the characteristics of culturally relevant teaching aligned with practices and themes that emerged

from students and teachers' data analysis. The findings and conclusions of this study suggest that what teachers do profoundly affect student achievement and that when teachers implement culturally relevant pedagogy, students feel accomplished. This research allowed me to identify practices that teachers can employ when working with African American male students. Implications of this study suggest the need for school leaders (teachers and principals) to make African American students feel valued by acknowledging them and their uniqueness and for administrators to devise a plan (a recruitment plan) of how to get more African American male role models in their schools. Recommendation for future research is highlighted in the study.

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CHAPTER I:  
INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most devastating phenomena in our country today is the failure of African American males to succeed in our public schools. Our African American males, in a sense, are being overlooked by educational leaders. They have been marked by the curse of equal treatment, with no regard to equity or an understanding that equal does not mean fair. In general, these students have become invisible to so many practitioners, those who hold the belief that all children can learn, but fail to educate all children. Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, wrote:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison, 1995, p. 3)

One of the primary functions of schools is to provide every student with a high-quality education. This high-quality education is one that equips and empowers every student to be viable contributors to our society. According to Ferguson and Mehta (2004), the primary objective of education is to provide all students with a quality education that will sustain them not only in school but also in life. Noltemeyer, Mujic, and McLoughlin view education as the preparation of “citizens to lead productive lives within our democratic society” (2012, p. 3). As Noltemeyer et al. state, “If we are to realize the promise of equal opportunity and participation for all students that is consistent with a democratic framework, then education should be provided fairly, equitably, and inclusively” (2012, p. 3). The idea, then, is that education, a

high-quality education, should be the basic right of every American – Black, White, Mexican, Asian, boy, girl, etc.

This notion of education for all is one that emerged later in America after the conclusion of the Civil War. Prior to the conclusion of the Civil War, education was relatively limited for African Americans. The history of education (or the lack thereof), as well as the destruction of education for African Americans, date back to 1619 when Africans were first brought to this land against their will. Africans in America “began their experiences...as indentured servants or slaves, neither of which were labor situations that they entered into willingly” (Noltemeyer et al., 2012, p. 5). Noltemeyer et al. (2012) noted that capturing of Africans, chaining them, and transporting them to America “established a persistent precedent for the lack of rights and inequitable treatment of Blacks” (p. 5). As Lee (2005) stated,

The African Holocaust of enslavement perpetuated one of the most horrific devastations of human history. As part of the culture of enslavement, it was against the law for Africans to learn to read and write. Africans were known to have their hands chopped off and were subjected to other forms of disfigurement when those who claimed to own African human beings discovered these enslaved persons engaged in learning to read or write. (p. 50)

Even such cruel treatment did not stop Africans from trying to learn to read and write (Lee, 2005). The beatings and cruel punishment for learning to read and write lasted for about 200 or more years until the end of the Civil War in 1865. However, prior to the Civil War, there were many African Americans--slaves and free--who recognized the need for education for people of color (Anderson,1988).These literate African Americans (former slaves) worked hard to “secure schooling for themselves and their children” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). Their efforts to secure universal schooling for African American children precluded the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Anderson wrote:

Before northern benevolent societies entered the South in 1862, before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and before Congress created the

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) in 1865, slaves and free persons of color had already begun to make plans for the systematic instruction of their illiterates. Early Black schools were established and supported largely through the Afro-American's own efforts. (1988, p. 7)

### **Background of the Study**

Shortly after the emancipation (June 19, 1865), representatives from the Freedman's Bureau were sent to the Deep South to set up schools for the freed African Americans (Lee, 2005). On November 20, 1865, a group of new freedmen met in Mobile, Alabama to discuss the future of African Americans. From this meeting came the commitment:

We regard the education of our children and youths as vital to the preservation of our liberties, and true religion as the foundation of all real virtue, and shall use our utmost endeavors to promote these blessings in our common country. (Jones & Richardson, 2003, p. 1)

Several decades later, Carter G. Woodson further articulated:

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not have to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (1993/2012, p. 5)

Perhaps what Woodson was conveying is that the African American male's education is subpar in comparison to his White male counterpart. A poor education does not offer the free or independent thinking necessary to excel in society. The author suggests that even if African American males finish school, if they are poorly educated, then they are still subjected to the will of the oppressor. Their thinking is controlled by those who are the educated, the powerful.

Every student deserves to have equal access to a high-quality and appropriate education; in addition, schools bear the responsibility of making it their mission to ensure that students are taught a curriculum which prepares them to operate and function in a competitive and diverse

global society--a society dominated by those who do not necessarily look, act, think, and/or believe like them--so that students can become contributing members of society. Even more, schools often form mission statements that give insight about what they believe and value; sometimes those mission statements are crafted under many educational philosophies that educators share, such as the beliefs that all students can learn. Such beliefs are easily documented and scribbled on pieces of papers, but the actual implementation of such is often contrary in practice. As a matter of fact, educators struggle with finding different ways to meet the many challenges that impede achievement that far too many of our students face.

Challenges such as social imagery (racial identity), inequitable schooling, socioeconomic status, parental support, teacher quality, and school and academic experiences often serve as impediments to great school experiences and academic achievement for African American males (Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, Flennaugh & Terry, 2012; Palmer, Davis, Moore & Hilton, 2010; Toldson & Owens, 2010; White, 2009). The *ETS Policy Notes* addressed the issue of the achievement, or lack thereof, for Black boys as follows:

America is failing its young Black boys . . . schools have become holding tanks for populations of Black boys who have statistically higher probability of walking the corridors of prison than the halls of college. Across America, the problem of Black male achievement seems intractable. (Prager, 2011, p. 1)

This struggle may exist primarily because most educators do not truly understand the many diverse needs of their diverse students, and much of what they know does not fully serve the needs of students in their schools, particularly their African American male students.

Much of the available research seems to suggest that students, who perform poorly academically and, as a result, fail one or more grades, have difficulty completing high school (Leuchovius, 2006). Possible factors contributing to this include the following risky behaviors (some of which are the same as the aforementioned challenges): prior grade failure,

underachievement, low self-esteem, frequent confrontation, non-acceptance by teachers and peers, poor school attendance, low level of interest and involvement in school and extracurricular activities, unstable family life, pregnancy, substance abuse, and a history of disruptive behavior (Lever, Sander, Lombardo, Randall, Axelrod, Rubenstein, & Weist, 2004).

In his speech at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Malcolm X (in public recognition of the problem) stated,

Education is an important element in the struggle for human rights. It is the means to help our children and our people rediscover their identity and thereby increase their self-respect. Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today. (1964, online)

Without an adequate education, one may not be able to position him/herself as a viable contributor for many opportunities such possession will allow one to experience. Marian Wright Edelman refers to education as the ticket to the American work place (1988). Edelman (1988) further writes, “While not a guarantee of success, education is a precondition to survival in America today” (p. 130). If this holds true, then it becomes imperative that schools work diligently to ensure every child receives a high-quality education.

Education is a challenging profession. Because of many past failures, especially in regards to the lack of success for minorities and low-income students, public education has not been a favorable entity in the eyes of the public (Donner & Schockley, 2010). MacIver and Epstein found that schools serving low-income and minority students are less likely to offer extensive remedial programs, advanced courses, or instruction that promotes higher-order learning (MacIver & Epstein, 1990; Mizelle, 2000). Low-income and minority students disproportionately attend schools that lack strong curricula and well-prepared teachers (Mizelle, 2000).

In an attempt to make education better and make educators more accountable, the federal government has made policy that appears to make the teaching profession one that is more focused on the academic progress of every student (i.e., No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act); however, the attempt has been flawed by the need to standardize tests and score schools, teachers, and children according to the results of said tests (Donner & Schockley, 2010). As Donner and Schockley (2010) posit, “the proliferation of standardized testing does not align with the necessary skills and competencies needed for the sustained workforce participation of African American males” (p. 48). Donner and Schockley (2010) believe that the NCLB achievement model is designed to produce results that discriminate among individuals. They further argue that the NCLB in its current form will restrict African American males’ capacity to be successful in the knowledge economy (p. 50). Thus, African American males will be subjected to learning from a one size fits all curriculum “that emphasizes curriculum coverage and pacing over culturally responsive teaching” (Donner & Schockley, 2010, p. 47). Donner and Schockley (2010) also believed that “by implementing a prescribed curriculum it is assumed that traditionally underserved students will have the same educational knowledge often associated with more academically successful groups” (p. 47).

In other instances, the federal government, by way of the Supreme Court, has had to get involved in education issues so that equity and fairness for all children could be realized. As Chief Justice Earl Warren, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) proclaimed,

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunities of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available on equal terms. (in Kluger, 1975/2004, p. 707)

Contrary to Chief Justice Warren’s philosophy, education has always been intended for the select, the rulers, and it has left the marginalized out of its circle. In her essay, “The Ruling

History of Education,” Rorty (1998) clarified and delineated for the readers the issues that concern and divide people. Rorty stated that reflection on education has naturally been directed to the education of rulers, to those who are presumed to preserve and transmit--or to redirect and transform--the culture of society, its knowledge and its values (Rorty, 1998). According to Rorty (1998), education historically has been focused on trying to find the right thing to do for the rulers. She argued that history suggests that schools have always sought to educate rulers to make them capable and willing to decide what is best for everyone, and they can then direct the whole state to do what is right (morally) (1998). Anderson (1998) made the same connection in his comparison of planters and former slaves:

The planters believed that stated government had no right to intervene in the education of children and, by extension, the larger social arrangement. Active intervention in the social hierarchy through public education violated the natural evolution of society, threatened familial authority over children, upset the reciprocal relations and duties of owners to laborers, and usurped the functions of the church. (p. 4)

Rorty (1998) also mentioned the importance of having a philosophy of education; however, she argued that because “educational policy is formulated by those who counsel the rulers who apply and implement it, the philosophy of education is typically addressed to rulers and their counselors (p. 2). Regardless, Rorty stated that the philosophy of education is vitally important but highly neglected. In teacher preparation programs, educators are taught that it is imperative to have an educational philosophy, a set of beliefs that guides practices.

What does that mean? Has this statement become a mere set of words that sounds good to the ear but are not demonstrated through our practices? Rorty (1998) argued that one can draw the conclusion that throughout history, education philosophy has been uniform. What people should know and how they should learn it has always been constructed by those “who counsel the rulers” for the rulers. Rorty (1998) claims that since educational policy is formulated

by those who counsel the rulers who apply and implement it, the philosophy of education is typically addressed to rulers and their counselors (p. 2)

However, this notion that all students can learn seems to be nothing more than an espoused theory or philosophy of education that educators echo only to sound inclusive in their practices, when in fact, research has shown that all students are not learning at high levels, especially African American boys (Howard et al., 2012). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2007, 2009, 2015), a vast number of African American boys in Grades 4, 8, and 12 did not reach grade-level proficiency in reading, math, history, and science. The Schott Foundation (2015) reported that 41% of African American males did not receive their diplomas with their 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort during the 2012-2013 academic year. African American males' high school graduation rates are consistently lower than their White-male counterparts (Travis & Ausbrooks, 2012).

In his 2009 State of the Union Address, President Barak Obama stated, "In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity--it is a prerequisite" (State of the Union Address, 2009). Knowing that such prerequisite is necessary for the opportunity, educators should seek to make sure that everyone is afforded a high-quality education. Lee (2005,) argued, however, that the quality of education for African American students (K-12) has been in a state of crisis since the end of the Civil War.

Data collected from NAEP (2009, 2015) suggest that education or the lack thereof for African American males is dismal and subsequently lethal. The report indicated that by fourth grade, 13% African American male fourth graders were proficient in reading, compared to 40% of White males; the discrepancy was also evident in fourth grade math--18% African American

males and 55% White males (NAEP 2009, 2013). Similar disproportionality existed between eighth grade African American males and White males, with only 11% of African American males proficient in reading compared to 36% proficiency for White males; as for math, 13% of African American males were proficient, while 45% of White males were proficient.

Given the most recent data available about certain sub-groups, such as African American males, it is evident that ensuring opportunities has not been the primary focus of many educators (Harper & Davis, 2012; White, 2009). Reynolds (2010) suggests that there is a cultural disconnect between teachers and students that contributes significantly to this opportunity gap (Milner, 2014). She further argues:

School officials' lack of positive regard for Black males, the absence of a belief in Black males' ability to achieve, the doling out of harsher punishments, rendering of derogatory and demoralizing comments, the consistent slight when it comes to providing them leadership opportunities, the overrepresentation in special education programs designed for those discrepancies in learning, and the reluctance to refer them for advanced classes regardless of class must be examined. (2010, p. 153)

Reynolds's argument highlights the cultural disconnection that exists in many schools and how failure to make such connections often leads to low teacher expectations for their African American male students (Reynolds, 2010). Teachers' low expectations, perhaps, may cause these students to form negative self-image and low self-esteem (Reynolds, 2010). Low expectations and cultural disconnection could lead to low outcomes (Reynolds, 2010).

Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012) posit that since the first national educational progress report (NAEP) in 1970, there has been at least four decades of persistent achievement gaps for African American children, especially males. Accordingly, the authors' reported that an African American male has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime compared to a 1 in 17 chance for a White male (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Among other risky behaviors, a lack of a high-quality education--one that meets the needs of the learner--for African American males will

only serve to strengthen the cradle to prison pipeline for our African American males (Fantuzzo et al., 2012).

Examining such practices is important if we wish to counter underachievement for African American males. As Reynolds suggests, such a pattern of underachievement has perilous implications for African American males (2010). These implications are often negative and may result in retention (grade failure), suspension, drop-out, disengagement, etc. (Hauser, 1999; Howard, 2008; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Reynolds, 2010). Some teachers may think that retention and suspension are the answers, when in fact they are part of the problem (Hauser, 1999; Howard, 2008; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Rumberger, 1995). Rumberger (1995) argues that grade retention is one the strongest predictors of school dropout. In his research, Hauser contends that students who were retained were more likely to drop out of school compared to those who were not retained.

Using the 2000 Office of Civil Rights (OCR) report, Reynolds (2010) concluded that African American students were 2.6 times more likely to be suspended from schools than their White counterparts. She further stated that the United States Department of Education reported that in the year 2000, Black students accounted for 34% of all out-of-school suspensions and 30% of all expulsions, with the overwhelming majority of these being males (p. 153). Additional research concludes that these students who have dropped out of school and/or have been suspended or expelled are more likely to become victims of the juvenile court system (Fenning & Rose, 2007).

### **Statement of the Problem**

African American male students continue to fail at overwhelming rates in America's public schools. This is not a new problem; however, such continued failure cannot be ignored.

Ferguson and Mehta (2007) noted that the lack of academic achievement could lead to various problems in life, such as poverty, incarceration, and unemployment, among others.

This research seeks to address the problem of African American male underachievement by identifying successful teaching practices that support their success. Dr. Carter Woodson (2012) noted in 1933 that “real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better, but rather the instruction so far given Negroes . . . has worked to the contrary” (p. 24). Schools repeatedly fail to adequately provide African American boys with the education they need to be successful in schools and ultimately in life. In his explanation of the problem with African American boys’ frustration with school, Noguera (2008) states:

For African American males, who are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school, the message is clear: individuals of their race and gender may excel in sports, but not in math or history. The location of African American males within schools--in remedial classes or waiting for punishment outside of the principal’s office--and the roles they perform within school suggest that they are good at playing basketball or rapping, but debating, writing for the school newspaper, or participating in the science club is strictly out of bounds. (p. 31)

In a previous CLAS (Council for Leaders of Alabama Schools) New Principal Summit (2013), Alabama’s former Superintendent of Education, Dr. Tommy Bice, stated that African American males in our state are performing significantly lower than their White male counterparts, as well as both Black and White females. It is certainly a harsh reality that the educational failure of African American boys in public schools in America is disturbing and should cause educators to rethink how we do schooling for this population.

Undoubtedly, the field of education is a challenging profession. However, educators bear the responsibility of educating all children and affording them the opportunity to receive an

education that will ultimately shape and cultivate them to be successful adult leaders. John Jackson (2012), president of the Schott Foundation, stated:

We have a responsibility to provide future generations of Americans with the education and the skills needed to thrive in communities, the job market and the global economy. Yet, too many Black and Latino young boys and men are being pushed out and locked out of the U.S. education system or find themselves unable to compete in the 21st Century economy upon graduation. (p. 1)

Schools must be much more responsive to the diversity of needs that all student populations represent. It is overwhelmingly clear that disability, giftedness, learning styles, and language barriers cut across race, class, and gender (Rodriquez, 2004). According to Rodriquez,

If the purpose of schools is to prepare students with a foundation of learning experiences that will position them to pursue additional educational attainment and meaningful life options--employment, self-determination, and so forth--it is crucial to revisit current conceptualizations . . . that keep us focused on the complex interplay among school resources, educational processes, and student outcomes. (p. 27)

The problem, therefore, is quite simple, yet the solutions are complex. The complexity of the solutions exists because we, as progressive Americans, tend to ignore the elephant in the room that comes as a result of those who favor freedom from law but ignore the protection of law for those who have been disenfranchised and marred by the deleterious decisions of those in power (the rulers). Since the ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the subsequent Court Order for schools to come in compliance with the law to fully desegregate schools, some school districts have sought to do the least possible to satisfy the law--only with hopes of being declared unitary status. In Chief Justice Warren's opinion in *Brown*, he states,

Education is the very foundation of good citizenship . . . it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. (*Brown v. Board of Education*)

African American males in America's public school are consistently at the bottom in academic achievement. Being Black in America's schools has not been favorable for so many

young African American males. School should be a place where students learn to learn and to develop a passion for learning more. It should be the place where students and educators learn about differences and acceptance and how to operate and function in a competitive, diverse and global society. This study will examine teachers' successful practices that support their African American adolescent males' achievement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Teachers have heard over and over again from many scholars, administrators, etc. that failure is not an option and that when students fail, teachers fail. Such statements often compel teachers to examine their practice in order to re-teach, re-tool, and reassess. The difficulty comes when one believes he/she has exhausted all of his/her efforts but still fails to identify why students struggle academically. The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The researcher will identify strategies that educators may consider as they work with African American boys in their classrooms.

Researchers have identified two important challenges facing America (Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998). Those challenges are: to ensure that African American children gain the skills they need to succeed and to understand the repercussions of not equipping these children with such skills (p. 7). The authors further argued, "If they [African American males] are underemployed, unemployed, or incarcerated, they will be increasingly dependent on the nation's system of health care and other social services" (p. 7). As a result, educators, have a challenging task ahead. That task may seem insurmountable when working with young men who have an ugly history that has been heavily influenced by slavery, segregation, racism, and educational and economic deprivation (Hrabowski et al., 1998, p. 8).

Teachers must be agents of hope and optimism, making sure every student feels like he/she can be successful. Thornburgh (2006) states that if students do not believe they are successful learners then they are at greater risk of dropping out of high school. Sagor (2002) further points out that when students feel competent as learners, they are more motivated to approach learning tasks. Therefore, it is important, if not urgent, to identify those teachers' practices that enable such hope, optimism, and feelings of competency.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The primary focus of this research is on the teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American male students. The theoretical perspective in which this research is grounded is culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy challenges the inequities that exist in education and serve as a barrier for many African American male students. Culturally relevant pedagogy is used to examine successful classroom practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males, as well examine structural or institutional racism that impedes academic success for African American male students.

### **Research Questions**

To establish an understanding of what teachers do to help students be successful in high school and beyond, a practical qualitative study of teachers and their practices and students and their experiences were conducted. These questions served to guide the study, as well as give more insight on my interviewees' experiences. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to their school achievement?
2. What are the teachers' practices that teachers say contribute to African American male school achievement?

3. How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and the teachers they identify as successful?

### **Definition of Terms and Concepts**

This section includes a discussion of the key concepts to be used in this study.

**African American Males**--male students whose parents are Black and are of African descent.

**Academic Achievement**--a student's attainment of a certain level of competence after completing a particular phase of education.

**Academic Achievement Gap**--the disparity between African American and Caucasian students (White, 2009).

**Academic Success**--for the purpose of this study, academic success is the completion of high school accompanied by one of the following: enrollment in a two-year or four-year college/university, enlistment in the military, and/or employment in a career field using credentials obtained from high school career technical endorsement.

**Underachievement**--a student's failure to attain a certain level of competence.

### **Significance of the Study**

As anticipated from the review of literature, conducting this research will afford me the opportunity to gain much as it relates to successful teaching practices and African American male students. The intent of this study is to contribute to the overall knowledge base about successful practices in the K-12 public school setting regarding African American male students. Specifically, this study focuses on successful teachers' practices, or, perhaps, behaviors, that contribute to the academic success of African American male students.

As highlighted in the overview of relevant literature, African American males are experiencing very little success in America's public schools (The Schott Foundation, 2012, 2015; NAEP, 2007, 2009, 2013, 2016). Such underachievement serves to make one functionally illiterate and unemployable (Husband, 2012; Leuchovius, 2006). Providing students with a high-quality education from highly qualified and highly skilled educators should be the responsibility of all school leaders. This research seeks to combat teacher ineffectiveness and student resistance to learning.

In addition to examining practices identified by teachers, the goal of this research is to listen to the voices of students and understand what they identify as successful practices in helping them learn and be successful. As curriculum expert Pinar (2004) explains, curriculum should be based on the lived experiences of children. It is highly possible, as suggested by scholars (Milner, 2014; Reynolds, 2010), that there may exist a massive gap or disconnect between teaching styles of teachers and learning styles of students, possibly making engagement (students' active participation in learning) nearly impossible. This research will help teachers identify effective strategies they can employ as they work with African American boys in their classrooms.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study is limited to African American males who recently (within three years) graduated from high school and are either in college, military, or the workforce (after having earned some type of career technical endorsement) and teachers they identify as being effective in teaching African American males. Students and teachers are selected from four high schools in Central Alabama. Analysis of data obtained is limited only to the experiences and/or perceptions of the participants in this study.

A limitation of this study is that this research is limited only to the perceptions and experiences of African American male students (recent high school graduates) that have been identified by a guidance counselor. An additional limitation is that teachers interviewed are those selected by the student participants as being effective in teaching African American males. The data is collected from responses to open-ended questions that were asked of both students and teachers. The assumption is that all participants were open and honest in their responses to the interview prompt.

### **Summary**

George Washington once stated, “Educate the Black man . . . and there will be no doubt of his prosperity” (“The Education Outlook in the South,” 1884). Without doubt, America public schools have failed our African American males. One of the most important educational issues in our country is the widening academic achievement gap between African American males and their White male counterparts (White, 2009). America’s schools have made very little progress to adequately serve and educate African American males; as a matter of fact, school leaders’ ability and efforts to educate this population of learners is only getting worse (Donnor & Schockley, 2010).

African American males are more likely to experience suspension, expulsion, and academic failure in schools, so the need to address best ways to maximize their learning potential should be a priority for educators (Laing, 2010). Donnor and Shockely (2010) identify two important reasons to address the academic achievement (or lack thereof) of African American males: (1) the link between low achievement educational attainment and incarceration and (2) the shift in the skills needed for productive participation in the global economy (pp 43-44).

This research seeks to address the overwhelming lack of underachievement for African American male students by examining successful teaching practices that lead to their success. The study focuses on providing remedy to underachievement by giving voice to students, as well as teachers, and valuing their perspectives as a being integral in identifying those practices.

## CHAPTER II: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review relevant literature as it is related to the proposed research inquiry. The central research questions of this study focus on teachers' practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The research will serve as a possible resource to help teachers remedy African American male underachievement. The chapter provides literature relevant to this research study.

### **History of Oppression**

Public school education has failed our African American males. Everyone wants to succeed--excel academically and attain educational success; however, the "promise of educational attainment has been elusive and difficult to achieve for many students, especially African American males" (Washington, 2010, p. 27). In 2010, The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center stated, "Young Black males are in a crisis in this country. Instead of addressing the problem, society has created entire prison industries out of our misery" (p. 9).

According to Jenkins (2006), the underachievement of African American males in America and the educational system demands immediate attention. In his 2006 research, Jenkins wrote:

[T]he challenges of reversing the negative circumstances facing African American [males] is daunting and requires working on the plight of the individual and transforming a broad array of social, political, economical, psychological, and educational issues that are deeply rooted in the very power structure of America . . . the experiences of the Black

man in America seems to be one in which he is called “mister” but is treated with a “niggardly” regard. And the result is the positioning of Black males at the lower rungs of society and their experiencing underachievement in almost all aspects of life. (p. 128)

Jenkins (2006) considers the task of reversing such negative circumstances a daunting challenge because of the systematic oppression that African American males face. He believes that changing the current status of African American men in American society requires more than intervention programs, remediation classes, etc. (Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins argues that the issues facing African American men “began hundreds of years ago and was compounded by hundreds of years of intentional and consistent oppression that is tied to the larger American power structures and extends beyond the educational community” (p. 150).

Such oppression has been evident for African Americans, particularly African American males, since 1619. Africans were brought to America, unwillingly, and were ripped of their culture: language, family, history, etc. Schneider and Schneider (2001) wrote:

Slaves born in Africa who came to North America exchanged temporary chaos and suffering of the middle passage for the confusion and hardship of life in a strange land. They did not know where they were. Few if any of the people around them understood what they said, and they understood little or none of what they heard. They were surrounded by strange objects . . . the slave traders and slave owners . . . treated them as savages to be subdued, workers whose power had to be harnessed, and sources of profit--not human beings. The slaves had been ripped of their status, their names, their families and friends, and their customs and culture. They were surrounded by fear, distrust, and sometimes hatred. No wonder it was commonplace for newly arrived slaves to try to run away or sink into a deep, sometimes suicidal depression. They stood naked to misery. . . . (p. 78)

African Americans did not just happen to fall into a mindset, an attitude or lifestyle of disenfranchisement; disenfranchisement was intentionally ingrained in them (Jenkins, 2006). Africans, to White Americans, were viewed as property that belonged to them for labor (Harris, 1993). White Americans believed that their whiteness gave them privilege that was reserved only

to whites with the right to exclude others (Harris, 1993). Harris noted that such privilege “was ratified and legitimated in law as a type of status property” (p. 1714). According to Harris,

Even in the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks . . . it was the interaction between conceptions of race and property that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination. The hyper-exploitation of Black labor was accompanied by treating Black people themselves as objects of property. Race and property were thus conflated by establishing a form of property contingent on race--only Blacks were subjugated as slaves and treated as property. Only White possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights. These distinct forms of exploitation each contributed . . . to the construction of whiteness as property. (p. 1716)

Although America had indentured or bond servants, their identity were in stark contrast of Africans that were captured and sold in America; bond servants were referred to as un-free White labor, while Africans were referred to as slaves (Harris, 1993). Furthermore, slave codes appeared between 1680 and 1682, and such laws placed restrictions on the Africans (Harris, 1993). Africans were not allowed to “travel without permits, to own property, to assemble publicly, to own weapons, or to be educated” (Harris, 1993, p. 1718).

Africans, because of their race, were considered inferior to whites, and as a result, whites used social status (power) and racial identity to justify slavery and the acquisition of slaves as property (Harris, 1993). What must be noted about property is that it is something that is transferrable. Slaves were considered economic assets and were often used for breeding so as to increase their owners’ property (Harris, 1993). Harris also noted, “Slavery as a legal institution treated slaves as property that could be transferred, assigned, inherited, or posted as collateral” (1993, p. 1720). Slaves, because they were the property of their owners, were subject to being compliant and obedient to the demands of their owners. Failure to follow such demands most often resulted in beatings or lynching, as well as being sold (Harris, 1993).

Such cruelty, as that of the beginning history of Africans in America and its lingering aftermath, has tremendous effect on African American males (Howard, 2014; Jenkins, 2006). This history, however, not only affects how African American males view themselves but also how White America and its many structures (educational, political, and economical) further institutionalized racism (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Ladson-Billings further asserts that such cruel history, as that which African American men have endured, causes them to be viewed as “problems that society must find ways to eradicate” (2011, p. 8). Howard posits that

[M]any of the contemporary portrayals of Black males have their roots in slavery and age-old racism that limited Black men’s mobility and depicted them as subhuman, criminals, absent-minded, and buffoons. Also prevalent during slavery, the dominant caricatures of Black men as coons and toms usually portrayed them as ignorant, docile, and groveling. (2014, p. 31)

Negative words, such as endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous, are often used to describe African American males (Palmer et al., 2010). Howard (2014) offers five depictions of the African American male that have plagued their image for over 400 years. These depictions, according to Howard (2014), still function today to inform the public’s perception of African American men. Howard (2014) posits,

These five depictions are (1) the physical brute and anti-intellectual, (2) the shiftless and lazy Black male; (3) the hypersexual Black male; (4) the criminal-minded Black male; and (5) the slickster-pimp/gangster Black male. These depictions have contributed immeasurably to the . . . academic . . . well-being of Black men. Black males have internalized oppression. Moreover, they have engaged in behavior that frequently reinforces many of these characterizations, which has made the disruption of these depictions even more challenging. (p. 31)

### **African American Males and Underachievement**

Perhaps one of the most devastating problems facing American society is the educational failure of African American males. Noguera (2003) believes that African American males are in deep trouble. In his study about African American male students, Howard (2014) posits, “The

picture, from multiple sources, paints a disturbing account of the overall manner in which many schools are falling woefully short in meeting the needs of Black males” (p. 13).

Jenkins (2006) argues that this is not a new predicament for African American men, “but rather a reflection of society’s inability to make substantial and long-lasting change for the betterment of this population” (p. 130). Jenkins’ (2006) research led to the following conclusions:

African American men are not being adequately served in the classrooms of our nation. One of the primary proofs of this the gain in literacy among Black men. According to the U.S. Census of 1900, 57% of Black males were illiterate. One hundred years later, the literacy rate among Black men persists at a high level of 44%. It has taken the nation 100 years to increase the literacy rate by only 13%. (p. 144)

Howard (2014) noted that African American males represent “a large segment of students attending U.S. schools who fail to gain access to a high-quality education” (p. 9). African American males “continue to be one of the more academically and socially marginalized students in U.S. Schools” (Howard, 2014, p. 9). Accordingly, the academic achievement gap between African American male students and their White counterparts continues to widen (White, 2009). In *Fact Sheet: Outcomes for Young, Black Men* by Tamika Thompson (2011), the author noted,

Young Black men--across the board--score below their counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups when it comes to graduation rates, literacy rates and college preparedness. And many African American men, in turn, are virtually locked out of employment and are filling up the nation’s prisons in disproportionate numbers. (p. 1)

A history of continued failure suggests that the schools have been less responsive and supportive to the needs of their African American male students (Palmer et al., 2010). The negligence of being attentive to the educational needs of the African American male students has affected these students’ reading and math proficiency, graduation rates, and participation in higher education (Palmer et al., 2010).

## **Reading**

Thompson's (2011) argument about the profound outcomes for African American students who are not succeeding in school has been supported by data provided by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Accordingly, on the 2009 fourth grade reading assessment, only 12% of Black male students performed at or above proficient levels, compared to 38% of White males (NAEP, 2009). In eighth grade, only 9% of African American males performed at or above proficient level in reading, compared with 33% of White males.

Similarly, a 2013 NAEP analysis provided consequent findings. The data also revealed that 14% African American male fourth graders were proficient in reading, compared to 41% of White males. Data for eighth grade students revealed that only 12% of African American males were proficient in eighth reading, compared to 38% of White males (NAEP, 2013). Green revealed that African American male students nationally scored an average of 104 points lower than their White male counterparts on the SAT college entrance exam in reading (2010).

Green further concluded that Black students were about one-third as likely to meet ACT college readiness benchmark as their White male counterpart (2010). As a result, African American male students may be three full years behind their peers (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). Husband (2012) conducted research on factors that contribute to reading underachievement of African American males, concluding that much of teachers' classroom practices and taught curriculum are associated with reading underachievement in African American males.

African American males are not only performing worse than their White-male counterparts but also other groups (Husband, 2012; Howard, 2014). Howard found that, based on data gathered from the National Center for Educational Statistics, that African American males

trailed White, Latino, and Asian males in grade-level reading proficiency. To make matters more alarming, Howard also found that in many larger districts in the U.S. African American male students “without disabilities had lower reading scores . . . and grade level proficiency than White males with disabilities” (2014, p. 13).

Husband (2012) found that African American males’ reading scores also lag behind females. Even more, girls outperform boys in the area of reading (Husband, 2012). He (2012) further suggests that schools very seldom offer reading resources that appeal to the interests of boys, which often leads to underachievement in reading for African American male students. Much of what African American males read in school are not socially and culturally relevant and authentic (Husband, 2012). Husband (2012) believes that:

Many states and school districts have implemented standardized reading curricula that inadvertently contribute to reading achievement disparities in Black males in two ways. They don’t consider the individuality of Black males as the basis for curriculum design and development, and, second, they don’t offer socially and culturally relevant strategies for teachers to differentiate their instructional practices to better meet the needs and interests of Black males. Such uniform standards encourage all teachers to teach all Black males in the same ways. They don’t consider the varied needs and interests of Black males from year to year and context to context . . . this lack of pedagogical differentiation and consideration for cultural and academic interests may also have contributed to reading disparities in Black boys. (pp. 24-25)

## **Math**

Math is often considered a gatekeeper to academic achievement and advancement which makes teaching African American males advanced levels of math of utmost importance (Terry, 2010; Howard, 2014). It can be argued that if African American males were provided high-quality math instruction they could gain access to many opportunities beyond high school. However, African American males are not performing at high levels in mathematics. They significantly trail their White counterparts in this area.

On the 2013 assessments, only 18% of African American boys were proficient in fourth grade math, compared to 55% of White boys (NAEP, 2013). Moreover, only 13% of African American boys were proficient in eighth grade math, compared to 45% of their White male counterparts (NAEP, 2013). The data reflect a 17.4% gap between African American male students and White-male students in Alabama (NAEP, 2013). This data suggests that African American males are struggling to keep up academically with their White male counterpart. According to data gathered from the 2009 National Center for Educational Statistics, Howard (2014) found that African American males' math proficiency scores were significantly lower than their White, Latino, and Asian male counterparts. He also found that African American male students who were ineligible for free and reduced meal program were outperformed by White-male students who were eligible for such program.

Terry (2010) states that the “composite data paint a picture of the plight of African American students through their Pre-K-12 academic experiences” (p. 75). He argues that it requires more than the status quo of good teaching to help African American males succeed in math (Terry, 2010). The difficulty in practicing good teaching lies in the highly racialized teaching and learning of mathematics (Terry, 2010). Terry argues,

The teaching and learning of mathematics, as such, is subject to the same sets of problems that present themselves across the spectrum of PreK-12 African American academic achievement. There is value, then, to research that critically-reflects upon the racialized realities of math achievement. (p. 76)

Ladson-Billings (1997) posits that teaching mathematics in America's public schools “emphasizes repetition; drill; convergent, right-answer thinking; and predictability” (p. 699). Such practices (instruction and curriculum) are aligned to the ideas of the White-middle class culture (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Teachers of mathematics often fail at connecting their instructional practices to the cultural expressions (rhythm, orality, communalism, spirituality,

expressive individualism, social time perspective, verve, and movement) of their African American male students (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

As *The Schott Foundation* (2015) suggests, this data “provides clear evidence of a systemic problem impacting Black males rather than a problem with Black males” (p. 6).

Howard (2014) argues that the data suggest,

that deficits lie in the structures, policies, practices, curricula, ideologies, teacher attitudes, and programs that exist in schools that Black males attend. Thus, the focus is not centered on how to fix Black males; rather, the suggestion is that these data may lead us to question how we can fix schools and practices that serve Black males. (p. 13)

### **Graduation Rates**

Using the 2012 report, Schott revealed that Alabama had 132,339 African American male students enrolled in its public schools. Of those students eligible for graduation, only 53% of them graduated from high school, while 69% of all White male students graduated from high school--making a significant gap of 15% and ranking Alabama 34th in the nation for graduating African American males from high school (*The Schott Foundation*, 2012).

In a 2015 report issued by *Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, it was reported that the national graduation rate for African American male students was 59% (a 6-point improvement from 2012), while that of White males was 80%. This is a slight improvement for African American males who, according to the 2012 report, had a graduation rate of 52% (The Schott Foundation, 2012, 2015). More specifically, the Schott analysis (The Schott Foundation, 2015) showed that the 2012-2013 graduation rate data indicates that, in 35 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, African American males have the lowest graduation rates among Latino and White male students. The 2015 report, showed a slight improvement for African American males in Alabama. This report showed that Alabama

graduated 57% of African American males and 72% of White male students--a significant gap of 15% (The Schott Foundation, 2015).

A 2004 Schott Foundation for Public Education found that 70% of African American males (nation-wide) entering the ninth grade will not graduate with their cohort (Holzman, 2004). Failure to graduate from high school has enormous impacts on individuals' well-being and livelihood. Dropping out of school has disastrous effects, such as individual, economic, and social consequences (Howard, 2014). Lack of education is also connected to high employment, welfare dependency, and criminal activity (Howard, 2014). Howard notes that "there is an increasing correlation between Black males who perform poorly in schools, many of whom ultimately drop out, and subsequent involvement in the penal system" (2014, p. 10).

**Reasons for low performance, retention and failure to graduate.** In a research conducted by Rumberger (1995), he discovered, from the results of his study, that a wide range of individual, family, and school-related factors are associated with dropping out of school. Among the many reasons, Rumberger also confirmed, based on years of study of academic achievement, that family socioeconomic status is highly predictive of dropping out (1995). He concluded that several family process factors –such as, parental academic support, parental supervision, and parents' educational expectations for their children –predicted dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995). One study revealed that the most likely reason given by students who were dropping out was that they were doing poorly in school and subsequently disliked school (Blum, 2005).

**Retention.** One of the main indicators or signs that a child is a potential drop out is grade retention (Roderick, 1995; Leuchovius, 2006; Blum, 2005). Much of the available research seems to suggest that students, who perform poorly academically and, as a result, fail one or

more grades, have difficulty completing high school (Leuchovius, 2006). Grade retention occurs when a student repeats a grade level because of poor grades or attendance. Roderick (1995) claimed that three aspects of retention combine to increase the risk of dropping out: retention in grade is not effective as a remediation strategy; retention is seen as a strong message that the school and teacher see the student as a failure; and retention makes a child older than his or her new grade peers. Holmes concluded that retention decreases educational opportunity, and it makes opportunities less equal among groups (2006).

**Effects of underachievement.** Research indicates that students who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed, incarcerated, and/or impoverished (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Howard, 2014; Leuchovius, 2006). Hines and Holcomb-McCoy (2013) found that African American males are overrepresented in juvenile detention centers and special education. Gavazzi, Russell, and Khurana (2009) and Howard (2014) suggest that there exist a great correlation between juvenile delinquency and academic achievement. Gavazzi et al. argue,

that poor academic achievement is related to both the onset and prevalence of delinquency, such that children experiencing lower academic performance are at least twice as likely to engage in delinquent behaviors as their high academic performance peers. In turn, youth displaying lower academic performance and higher rates of delinquency during high school are more likely to drop altogether . . . a higher percentage of delinquent youth experienced difficulty in reading, spelling, and math. (p. 100)

Using data from the 2005 Bureau of Justice statistics, Howard (2014) found that African American males

outnumber all other ethnic groups in the prison population and have a rate of incarceration that is five times higher than the rate of White males . . . and that based on current demographics one in every three Black men can expect to spend time in prison, probation, or on parole during his lifetime. (p. 11)

Leuchovius (2006) stated that students who drop out are more likely to also earn half as much annual income as a high school graduate, have children at an early age, use illicit drugs,

tobacco, or both, and become overweight. As a result, the social costs of the dropout problem include an under-skilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, and increased public assistance, and crime (Woods, 2001). Results from the Indiana Department of Education employer survey found that a student who graduates with a certificate of completion is better qualified for employment opportunities compared to a student who has dropped out of high school (Smith & Smith, 2001). Dropouts contribute disproportionately to the unemployment rate. In 2001, 55% of young adult dropouts were employed, compared to 74% of high-school graduates and 87% of college graduates (Smith & Smith, 2001).

Other research lists the following risky behaviors associated with low achievement (some of which are the same): prior grade failure, underachievement, low self-esteem, frequent confrontation, and non-acceptance by teachers and peers, poor school attendance, low level of interest and involvement in school and extracurricular activities, unstable family life, pregnancy, substance abuse, and history or disruptive behavior (Lever et al., 2004).

**Curriculum.** In research conducted by Cummins (1984), he found that the extent to which African American male students' own interests are incorporated into the school program appears to be significantly related to their academic success. One study reports that as many as 40 to 60% of African American male students are disengaged (disconnected or uninterested) from school by the time they reach high school (Brueining, 2009). In research conducted by Cummins (1984), he found that the extent to which students' own interests are incorporated into the school program appears to be significantly related to their academic success.

According to Kunjufu, only 12% of African American males are on grade level (2011). In an older research study by MacIver and Epstein (1990), suggesting the long-term nature of this problem, the authors found that schools serving low-income and minority students are less likely

to offer extensive remedial programs, advanced courses, or instruction that promotes higher-order learning. According to Mizelle's (2000) research, low-income and minority students disproportionately attend schools that lack strong curricula and well-prepared teachers. According to a group of authors (Bloom, Rock, Ham, Melton, & O'Brien, 2001), evidence shows that a demanding curriculum has intellectual and practical benefits for students of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and gender.

Bruce and Singh (1996) found that lower levels of engagement tend to correspond to lower levels of achievement." Vatterott (2009) states that students connect personally with the content when they identify with people or feelings, connect the content with something in their everyday life, use the content to understand the world around them, or wrestle with moral or ethical dilemmas. According to Tatum (2006), many African American males do not read because the texts that are available for them to read are not socially and culturally consistent and authentic. Additionally, Boykin and Cunningham (2001) argued that many teachers construct learning activities that do not take specific learning styles of African American males into consideration when developing instructional activities.

Many teachers and administrators have a one size fit all approach to education, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment. They believe that by having a standardized curriculum approach to teaching will make teachers and parents more responsible and accountable for children's learning and ultimately their success. This theory can be witnessed through the federal mandate of No Child Left Behind from 2001 and the current 2015 mandate, Every Student Succeeds Act. Schools are examined by state mandated standardized tests that measure student achievement and school effectiveness. The results of the tests determine whether or not schools meet annual yearly progress (AYP) and have sufficiently met and/or pass their required

benchmark. As the authors state, schools consistently failing to make AYP can be ordered into “radical restructuring,” which may include having the state intervene in running the school (McQuillan & Salomon-Fernandez, 2008). Pinar (2004) writes,

Using the business model, politicians and others have made the commonsensical argument that all that matters is the bottom line--scores on standardized tests--and in the process converted the school into a business, a skill-and-knowledge factory, but a business--not an educational institution--nonetheless. pp. 27-28)

In a sense, this mandate appears to be satirical in that it seeks to make fun of public education by making it appear that all students can learn the same and that uniform testing is the way to distinguish if a school is a failing school or a successful one. Many believe that all students should be held to the same standard regardless of their cultural make-up, which can serve as a handicap if they are not Americanized - embracing all that is American from the perspective of the White-dominant male (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). The authors argue that there exists a misalignment between public school assessment policies and teaching practices in accordance with NCLB (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Diamond and Spillane (2004) argue that teacher pedagogy in accordance with NCLB emphasizes curriculum coverage and pacing over culturally responsive teaching.

Educators bear the responsibility of educating all children and affording them the opportunity to receive an education that will ultimately shape and cultivate them to be successful adult leaders. According to Rodriquez (2004), one of the primary purposes of schools is to prepare all students with a foundation of meaningful learning experiences. Such experiences will position students to seek additional educational advancements and meaningful life options (Rodriquez, 2004).

Pinar (2004) posits that curriculum development has been left in the hands of the men, mainly White, who usually work at the collegiate levels and has been imparted to the females,

who work mainly in K-12 schools. Such practices add to the beliefs that education in America is highly racialized. Evidence can be seen by examining the academic performance of African American males in America's schools. Our African American males in America's schools are lagging far behind their White-male counterparts in reading and math, but are leading the way in drop-outs and retention (Hauser, 1999; Howard, 2008; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Rumberger, 2000).

Exposing the truth of institutionalized racism and poor pedagogy allows for us to move forward as a nation, and it creates passages out of and away from the stasis of the historical present (Pinar, 2004). In a sense, there needs to be a rebirthing of the academic consciousness of the African American male.

***Factors that impact underachievement.*** Shawn Dove (2009) states that African American males often make up the lowest performance group and are at higher risk of dropping out. The author further suggests that the graduation rate for African American males is declining, with 60% of them end up a part of the criminal justice system (Dove, 2009). The author identifies the root of the problem as being: poverty, an underinvestment in public education, low expectations by teachers, students and parents, zero tolerance school discipline policies, federal No Child Left Behind (2012) progress requirements, and over-reliance on standardized test scores (Dove, 2009, p. 193). Wyatt (2009) posits that racism, socioeconomic disadvantages, and oppression effect the academic development of African American males.

***Stereotype threat.*** One important factor central to understanding of the academic achievement of African American males is stereotype threat. Steele (1997) uses the term "stereotype threat" to explain the social-psychological threat that emerges when one is doing something "for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies" (p. 614). Steele notes that

no group is exempt from stereotype threats, and consequently, in the existence of negative stereotypes about a group, members of that group can fear being labeled by that stereotype.

Steele (1997) further argues that negative stereotypes have tremendous effects on academic performance. Steele also identifies two ways in which stereotype threat negatively impact student achievement.

First, if the threat is experienced in the midst of a domain performance--classroom presentation or test-taking, for example--the emotional reaction it causes could directly interfere with performance. Secondly, when this threat becomes chronic in a situation, it can pressure disidentification, a reconceptualization of the self and of one's values so as to remove the domain as a self-identity, as a basis of self-evaluation. Disidentification offers the retreat of not caring about the domain in relation to the self. (Steele, 1997, p. 614)

Steele posits that schooling and its environment are hostile to groups that are products of negative stereotypes long before the achievement gap manifests (1997). Such hostility leads to inferiority anxiety by students and underachievement (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This anxiety generally leads to the development of a victim's identity, causing the victim to blame others for their problems (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Osborne (2001) suggests that this perspective leads to two good reasons why African American males disidentify with schools: to reduce anxiety and improve self-esteem by eliminating a source of negative evaluation--academics (p. 47).

***Cultural-ecological perspective.*** A second factor to understanding the low academic achievement of African American males is that of Ogbu's cultural-ecological perspective. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state that one major reason that [African American males] do poorly in school is because they experience unusual mixed emotions and disharmony toward academic achievement. The authors attribute this attitude to White Americans' continual refusal to acknowledge the intellectual abilities of African American males (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). As the authors note, this causes African American males "to define academic success as White

people's prerogative, and [begin] to discourage their peers from emulating White people in academic striving from acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177).

Cultural ecology, as described by Ogbu, is "the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment" (Ogbu, 1990, p. 122). Ogbu's theory has two major parts: (1) the system--the way the minorities are treated or mistreated in education in terms of educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials; (2) community forces--the way the minorities perceive and respond to schooling as a consequence of their treatment (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) posit that within the ecological structure of African American males these students have been subjects of substandard schooling. This schooling, its curriculum and instructional practices have been based primarily on what White Americans (generally, White men) deem to be the educational needs of African American males.

Ogbu separates minority groups into two groups: voluntary and involuntary (Osborne, 2001) It must be noted that students from these two groups are very different students; even more, their outcomes, academically, are different. Voluntary minorities are generally minorities that are immigrants and who view education as a path to success in their new country (Osborne, 2001). Involuntary minorities, however, are those minorities considered disenfranchised, those who were brought into a society against their own will (Osborne, 2001). These individuals, according to Osborne, generally oppose the social identity of the White dominant group.

**Cool pose.** The third factor that Osborne shares that has been used to understand African American male achievement in school is what Majors and Billson call cool pose (Osborne, 2001). Osborne identifies this concept as being a "ritualized form of masculinity that allows that boy or man to cope and survive in an environment of social oppression and racism" (Osborne,

2001, p. 48). Osborne (2001) argues that cool pose usually leads to behaviors that elicit school discipline.

Osborne (2001, p. 48) summarizes his research by suggesting that all three of these theories suggest that African American males are at high risk of academic disidentification. He further makes the claim that African American males are more likely to experience academic disidentification and that such disidentification is related to academic outcomes (Osborne, 2001).

*Nogera's structural vs cultural perspective.* An opposing view to understanding the low academic achievement of African American males is that which is offered from the work of Noguera (2001). Noguera (2001) believes that structural and cultural factors have detrimental effects for African American males. Howard (2014) believes that such factors (structural and cultural factors) “must be addressed if changes are to disrupt patterns of school underperformance for Black males” (p. 22). Noguera challenges the views researchers who believe that cultural and structural factors inhibit the success for African American male students. He argues that, although cultural pressures are important and relevant to academic performance, it fails to give explanation to individual behavior (Noguera, 2001). Noguera states that such limited view and explanation about African American male students only provides a view about those African American males students that “succumb and become victims of their environments,” but it fails in fostering an understanding about “about resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies employed by individuals whose lives are surrounded by hardships” (2001, online).

Noguera argues that in order for educators to positively affect the academic achievement for African American males they must deepen “their understanding of the ways in which

individuals cope with and respond to their social environment and the cultural milieu in which they live and are socialized” (2001, online). Howard (2014) argues,

Noguera’s work challenges the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) by claiming evidence showing that many Black males deliberately challenge racial stereotypes and redefine their racial identities to demonstrate that is possible to do well in school and still maintain racial pride and cultural integrity. Works such as Noguera’s...offer a counternarrative to the account that repeatedly has been offered on Black males, wherein they are essentially doomed to academic failure because of oppositional behavior and are unable to overcome the myriad of obstacles in their path to academic success. (pp. 22-23)

***Teachers’ expectations.*** Howard (2014) believes that teachers’ attitude and perceptions about their African American male students have a tremendous impact on their educational outcomes. In synthesizing Rosenthal and Jacobson’s 1968 research, Howard (2014) posits that teachers’ expectations influence the academic performance of students. This finding is what led to what is known as the Pygmalion effect--the belief that higher expectations lead to increase performance (Howard, 2014). Accordingly, Howard believes that low teacher expectations, as well as negative views of African American males, are explanations for low student achievement and academic disengagement from school (2014). Milner (2007) believe that “high expectations are necessary to help . . . students emancipate themselves and move beyond their current situations” (p. 244).

Milner further argues that teachers must debunk negative views (stereotypes and misconceptions) about their African American male students (2007). Such thinking prevents teachers from “providing the best learning opportunities for students” (Milner, 2007, p. 244).

Milner posits,

If teachers believe Black males are destined for failure and apathy, their pedagogies will be saturated with low expectations; teachers will be unwilling to prepare for their courses and unwilling to provide Black male students...with the best. In essence, teachers often think about Black male students through deficit lenses. Deficit thinking and beliefs result in inaccurate, incorrect, and harmful perceptions of Black students. (p. 244)

When teachers form deficit thoughts and belief, they lower their expectations for their African American male students (Milner, 2007; Howard, 2014). This happens because they have developed preconceived notions about their African American male students' potential and ability to perform at high levels (Milner, 2007; Howard, 2014).

*Successful instructional practices.* In his study on African American male student success, Howard (2014) highlighted the need for schools to work to help schools to challenge their view of African American men as being problematic. He argued that if the African American males are continuously viewed as the problem, then schools efforts to challenge educational practices will be rooted in "problem-based and deficit terms" (Howard, 2014, p. 111). He wrote,

A deficit-driven approach can be seen in schools all across the country, wherein approaches to "fix" or "deal with" Black males are often dealt with by placement in opportunity rooms, discipline rooms, detention centers, or other spaces designed to punish students until they change their ways, without any attempt to authentically understand their behavior and engage them in a meaningful way. (Howard, 2014, p. 111)

Howard (2014) further posited that it practitioners, researchers, and policymakers should be mindful in identifying "critical ingredients that contribute to Black male success" (p. 112). As Howard (2014) argued, all students learn differently and may respond differently, but there are several recommendations he offered (from student perspectives) to schools and teachers to assist their African American male students in achieving academic success.

1. Create spaces for dialogues.
2. Reduce the stigma of remediation.
3. Rethink and revise discipline policies.
4. Learn from athletic coaches.
5. Incorporate the role of social media and popular culture. (Howard, 2014, pp. 107-110)

Jenkins (2006) posited that all too often African American males experience marginalization in the classroom and such marginalization, in addition to social issues, “makes the educational arena yet another system that fails to understand and adequately serve young Black men” (p. 146). He believes that schools must work to help change the current status of African American males, but such changes “will require more than a few interventions programs, special education course, and teacher training.” Using research from Garibaldi’s 1992 study, Jenkins made the following suggestions for practitioners:

1. African American male students should be taught values, etiquette, and morality in schools. They should also be taught why school success is important.
2. African American male students should be strongly encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities.
3. Teachers should encourage African American students at an early level to pursue a college or post-secondary education.
4. Teachers should demonstrate the relevance of coursework to the adult years. (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 152-153)

In addition to highlighting Garibaldi’s recommendations, Jenkins suggested the following: (1) create space for African American males to better understand their current situation and how they came to be positioned there; (2) restructure existing curriculum, pedagogy, and supplemental services to be more inclusive; and (3) provide students with greater cultural immersion experiences that might deepen their connection to their ancestry and history.

In *Policy Notes* (2011, p. 8), Sawicki offered a framework he uses as a tool to address underachievement of African American male students. This framework is used as a tool to steer students toward a path to school excellence. Sawicki identified this work as the Three Pillars of Excellence.

1. Academics. Rigorous and challenging academics.

2. Structure. High behavior standards become the expectation.
3. Engagement. Joy leads to engagement. (The Policy Notes, p. 8)

In his study on African American male student success and strategies schools could employ,

White offered the following recommendations for practitioners:

1. High standards and high expectations for all students.
2. Classroom instructional strategies, i.e. differentiation, cooperative learning, instructional time, use of technology, affirmation process, and communicative learning.
3. Adult Advocacy at school who listens and assists students where possible.
4. School programs and initiatives, i.e. mentorship, afterschool programs. (2009, pp. 7-14)

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. It is through Ladson-Billings' idea of culturally relevant pedagogy that I aim to challenge the many academic inequities that exist in our public schools and offer hope to so many African American males. In addition, there is hope to raise the critical consciousness of teachers of these African American male students--who because of their color have had the misfortune of experiencing the results of racial permanence and White dominance. Banks and Banks (2007) argue, "The problem of the 21st century is the problem of race--and ideology that has served well to successfully obscure and disguise class interests behind the smokescreen of multiculturalism, diversity, difference, and more recently, whiteness."

Reynolds (2010) makes the assertion that students of color often suffer from cultural disconnection. Reynolds explains that a cultural disconnect may occur when individuals from differing cultures interact (p. 146). Ladson-Billings (1995) talks about the importance of good

teaching as one that ensures those connections and questions why so little of it occurs in classrooms primarily populated by African American students.

The theoretical perspective used to frame this practical qualitative study is that of cultural relevant pedagogy (CRP). This theoretical perspective frames the entire study, and guides and anchors the data collection and analysis. The data informing this study reveal that in America's school there is a pattern of underachievement for African American males. Because this research focuses on the school experiences of African American male students with the intent of combating underachievement for them, it is important to use culturally relevant pedagogy as conceptual framework. Culturally relevant pedagogy is important to this study because it is used to challenge racial educational structures that impede student achievement and identify teaching practices that improve the academic success of African American male students.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The concept of culturally relevant pedagogy was termed by Gloria Ladson-Billings, who like many other educational researchers worked to examine ways that instructional practices could better match the home and community of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2014) began this work with the primary focus of discovering practical ways to improve college teacher education programs and make them more culturally relevant. Her study led her to focus primarily on eight teachers who she found to be “thoughtful, inspiring, demanding, and critical” and were “connected to the students, their families, their communities, and their daily lives” (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Prior to the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), several cultural pedagogies were developed, but those pedagogies were limited in their efforts to explain both student achievement and cultural identity. Some of those pedagogies (as cited by Ladson-Billings, 1995) included the

following: culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally responsive and culturally compatible. In 1981, Au and Jordan coined the term “culturally appropriate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Au and Jordan identified this practice as the instructional practices of a Hawaiian school that worked to incorporate students’ cultural background into their reading instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Esposito & Swain, 2009).

Conducting similar work in 1981, Mohatt and Erickson worked with Native American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Esposito & Swain, 2009). Through their work and observation of teacher-student interactions and participation structures, they found that teachers who used language interaction patterns that closely matched the students’ home cultural patterns helped to improve student academic performance (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Esposito & Swain, 2009). This practice was termed culturally congruent (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Esposito & Swain, 2009).

Additional study in 1981 by Cazden and Leggett and in 1982 by Erickson and Mohatt led to the pedagogy termed culturally responsive, a term used to describe language interactions of teachers and students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Esposito & Swain, 2009). Then Jordan in 1985 and Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp in 1987, coined the term culturally compatible to explain classroom teachers successes with their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) points out that these practices share common features in that they all locate the source of student failure and achievement, as it relates to the speech and language patterns of the teacher and her students, and they all suggest that “student success is represented in achievement within the current social structures extant in the schools” (p. 467).

As a result, this greatly concerned Ladson-Billings because such ideas seemed to reproduce the inequity in education. Accordingly, the aforementioned pedagogies seem to suggest that efforts of education should focus on fitting students of color into the mainstream

society (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Singer, 1988). Ladson-Billings (1995) furthers her argument for a different approach by suggesting that three of these pedagogies (culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, and culturally compatible) were more of a mismatch between school and home, and as a result, creates a disconnect between home/community culture and school culture.

The concept of cultural synchronization was later developed by Irvine in 1990 and was used to describe the “necessary interpersonal context” that must exist between the teacher and students so that learning can be maximized (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) agrees with the importance of this work and recognizes the work as important to explaining cultural deficits and cultural disadvantages and their connection to compensatory educational interventions.

Ladson-Billings (1995), however, wanted to extend this work to address more than just student achievement. Ladson-Billings (1995) calls her pedagogy “the pedagogy of the opposition” that is committed to collective empowerment. Her pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, can be defined as a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools perpetuate” (p. 469). Beauboef-Lafontant (1999) suggests that successful teachers of students of color should not only incorporate and respect cultural values but to understand and critique oppressive structures that adversely affect students of color.

In her book, *DreamKeepers*, Ladson-Billings makes the distinction between excellent teaching and excellent teachers (2009). She argues that the way we teach “profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of that curriculum” (2009, p. 15). Teaching in a milieu shaped by the permanence of racism calls for a critically informed and culturally knowledgeable

pedagogy. Ladson-Billings examines the concept of culturally relevant teaching and how it can improve the educational lives of African American students (2009).

The idea of culturally relevant pedagogy is the commitment to collective empowerment of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Esposito and Swain (2009) identify two main purposes of culturally relevant pedagogy:

First, it draws on students' home cultures as a mechanism for helping them achieve success in school. Second, through culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers enable their students to think critically about the injustices inherent in schools and the broader society. (p. 38).

The foundations of culturally relevant pedagogy rest on what Ladson-Billings (1995) calls three criteria and or propositions:

1. Students must experience academic success;
2. Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence;
3. Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006)

**Academic achievement.** First, students must understand that there is need for academics.

Culturally relevant teachers hold the belief that students who enter their rooms are capable of academic success (Hastie, Martin, and Buchanan, 2006). In undergraduate programs (at least in my experiences), most teacher education programs ask students to write their philosophy of education. Many times, educators share the philosophy that they believe that all students can learn. Then, as they enter into the profession and experience the many challenges that come with teaching and learning, they slowly adopt the philosophy: that all students can learn something.

Contrary to this thought, culturally relevant teachers believe that every child that enters their classroom is capable of academic success. Even more, these teachers take responsibility for their students' learning and academic success. Ladson-Billings (2006) describes academic

success as student learning, with the focus being more on what students know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers. In writing about culturally relevant pedagogy, Laughter and Adams (2013) make the claim:

Culturally relevant pedagogy does not allow an either/or choice between a teacher connecting to the students in the classroom and pushing the students to succeed on relevant measures of academic achievement; culturally relevant pedagogy requires both, with the caveat that student learning must not come at the expense of cultural identity. (p. 3)

Teachers must attend to students' academic needs. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), "The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to 'choose' academic excellence" (p. 162). This might require teachers to find ways to value students' skills and abilities and channel them in academically important ways. Embracing culturally relevant teaching as pedagogy requires a shift in thinking about how children learn.

**Cultural competence.** Second, students must maintain culture integrity. The author highlights the belief held by many African American students that school is more often a place where they cannot be themselves (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy challenges teachers' traditional mainstream practices and forces them to differentiate instruction or practices to address the learning needs of African American males, while simultaneously addressing bridging the cultural disconnect.

Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that culturally relevant teaching requires that as students achieve academic excellence they do not lose their cultural integrity. She further argues that school is often perceived as a place where African American students cannot be themselves. For some, making good grades and excelling in other academic arenas may cause them to label or be perceived as acting White (Fordham, 1988).

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant teachers “utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). Culturally relevant teachers understand the need to help students celebrate and honor their own culture while simultaneously gaining access to the wider culture (Laughter & Adams, 2013). Ladson-Billings gives examples of cultural relevant pedagogy; however, one example that stands out most to me occurred in my own classroom. In teaching *Romeo and Juliet*, I discovered that many of my students had a tough time understanding the language and were disconnected from the content. I worked to bring in songs and had students rewrite the Shakespeare classic into language that made sense to them.

As an example, Juliet asked Romeo how he got to her house, seeing that it was well protected. Romeo replied that it was through love’s wings did he “over-perch” the walls. To help my students understand what Romeo was saying, we listened to Marvin Gaye’s timeless classic, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.” In this same lesson, Juliet asks Romeo to prove his love to her. Romeo begins swearing by the moon and the stars. Again, using music, my students and I pulled the lyrics from John Michael Montgomery’s “I Swear.” In this sense, cultural relevant teachers merge academic achievement and cultural competence.

**Critical consciousness.** Lastly, culturally relevant teaching affords the students the opportunity to engage the world and others critically (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) believes that culturally relevant teaching should not only focus on individual achievement but that students should develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness. Such consciousness allows students “to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162).

This extends students beyond just the classroom and equips them to think more critically about the world and others (Laughter & Adams, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Preparing

students for active citizenship becomes a reality when teachers equip them with the tools to critically analyze society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This allows students, as well as teachers, to recognize social inequities and their causes and empowers them to act on such social injustices.

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper's (2011, p. 66) work found that culturally relevant pedagogy "maintains that teachers need to be non-judgmental and inclusive of the cultural backgrounds of their students in order to be effective facilitators of learning in the classroom." Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) wrote that the American educational system's main problem is to guarantee that all students, especially racial/ethnic minority students and in this case, African American males, experience academic achievement. The authors support the notion that culturally relevant pedagogy is integral in ensuring student success. In their study, they reinforced the need for connections between the home-community and the school culture (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). They continue by stating:

Furthermore, acknowledging the home-community environments of students in teaching and learning supports tenets of critical race theory in its critical, constructive analysis of how race relations in the United States informs the study and implementation of education in schools. More directly, culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory can inform the delivery of pedagogy in America's schools. (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 68)

It is with great hope that this study will highlight how educational inequities can be overcome or at least mitigated through teachers' practices informed by culturally relevant pedagogy. The connection will be made in hopes of identifying teachers' more equitable practices that contribute to African American males' successful school achievement.

### **Statement of Rationale**

The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The quality of education that African American males receive in our American public schools has been, and continues to be, poor. African American

males continue to perform significantly worse than their White male counterparts (NAEP, 2009, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2009) argued that public schools in American have failed to demonstrate sustained efforts to provide African American [males] students with a high-quality education.

### **Summary**

The central research question of this study focuses on successful practices of teachers and the experiences of African American males in their classrooms. The historical experiences of African American males and the current underachievement they are experiencing in America's schools serves as justification for using culturally relevant pedagogy as an explanation for the inequitable education many of these males receive. Additionally, such explanation makes culturally relevant pedagogy even more viable as a curriculum strategy to help teachers of African American males, as well as the students, overcome such doleful fates.

How did we get here--this place of new normality for the African American male student? Some argue that the decline of the African American male can be attributed to low-socioeconomic status (Axelrod et al., 2004); some suggest that maybe it is the lack of proper parenting or little to no parental involvement in a child's education (Axelrod et al., 2004); and still, others argue that the dismal status of the African American male is attributed to all that is "White" (Banks & Banks, 2007).

Perhaps these beliefs may affect student learning; however, they tend to take the focus away from what is most important. They seem to serve more as an excuse about why children are not excelling in the classroom, causing teachers and schools to focus more on the things they cannot control. What schools do have control over is providing students with a high-quality education lead by highly skilled and highly qualified educators. This study focuses on highlighting those effective practices that teachers employ to engage African American males

academically. Culturally relevant pedagogy is the conceptual lens that will be used to frame this study. It is used to address the racial structures that impede student achievement in school, and equally important is its use in highlighting instructional practices that work in improving the academic success of African American male students.

CHAPTER III:  
METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

**Introduction**

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methodology and procedures used to frame this study. The chapter is organized into several sections that guide the reader in understanding the methodology of the research. Among the provided sections are the purpose of the study, the research questions that guide the study, setting, participants, data collection, data analysis, and summary.

The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The goals of the research are to help me personally gain more knowledge as it relates to successful teaching practices and the African American male, to contribute to the overall knowledge base about successful practices in the K-12 public school setting regarding African American males, to listen to and give students voice, empowering them to identify successful practices their teachers employ in helping them experience academic achievement.

**Research Questions**

To establish an understanding of what teachers are doing to help students be successful in high school and beyond, a practical qualitative study of teachers and their practices and students and their experiences was conducted. These questions served to further explore my topic, as well as give more insight on my interviewees' experiences. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to their school achievement?
2. What are the teachers' practices that teachers say contribute to African American male school achievement?
3. How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and the teachers they identify as successful?

### **Research Design**

Methodology, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008) is a way of thinking about and studying social phenomena. Accordingly, methods are defined as the techniques and procedures for gathering and analyzing data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, Corbin and Strauss (2008) identified qualitative research as follows:

Any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It [qualitative research] can refer to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, and cultural phenomena. (pp. 10-11)

These two researchers write that "every methodology rest on the nature of knowledge and of knowing. . . ." (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1).

A qualitative research design has been selected to frame this research. One reason for choosing qualitative research is because this method has proven to be useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events they experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that qualitative research is research that focuses on the lives, lived experiences, behaviors, and emotions of individuals. This methodological approach is one that "allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12).

Qualitative research results in analysis that examines and interprets data with the sole purpose of eliciting meaning, gaining understanding, and developing empirical knowledge.

Ospina (2004) identifies seven reasons to use qualitative research:

- To explore a phenomenon that has not been studied before (and that may be subsequently developed quantitatively);
- To add rich detail and nuance that illustrates or documents existing knowledge of a phenomenon, generated quantitatively;
- To better understand a topic by studying it simultaneously (triangulation) or concurrently with both methods (mixing quantitative and qualitative methods at the same time or in cycles, depending on the problem);
- To advance a novel perspective of a phenomenon well studied quantitatively but not well understood because of the narrow perspectives used before;
- To try to “understand” any social phenomenon from the perspective of the actors involved, rather than explaining it (unsuccessfully) from the outside;
- To understand complex phenomena that are difficult or impossible to approach or to capture quantitatively;
- To understand any phenomenon in its complexity, or one that has been dismissed by mainstream research because of the difficulties to study it, or that has been discarded as irrelevant, or that has been studied as if only one point of view about it was real. (p. 8)

There are five approaches to qualitative research and each has its own unique characteristics (Hatch, 2002). In addition, there are many kinds of qualitative research (Hatch, 2002). In choosing a qualitative research methodology, I wanted to be careful to choose one that would adequately aligned with the questions that frame the research. As a result, I chose to use interview study as the kind of qualitative research because it most closely aligns to the goals of my study.

Interview study is a kind of qualitative research that “seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects” (Kvale, 2006, p. 482). Kvale (2006) describes interview study accordingly:

In qualitative interviews, social scientists investigate varieties of human experience. They attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world. The interviews give voice to common people, allowing them to freely present their life situations in their own words, and open for a close personal interaction between the researchers and their subjects. (p. 481)

Hatcher (2002) writes that interview, although often a part of participant observation research and other approaches, “can be the primary collection strategy in a qualitative project” (p. 23). He further explains that “qualitative interviewers create a special kind of speech event during which they ask open-ended questions, encourage informants to explain their unique perspectives on the issues at hand, and listen intently for special language and other clues that reveal meaning structures informant use to understand their worlds” (Hatcher, 2002, p. 23).

Kvale (2006) argues that interviews give voice to people, especially those who often seem voiceless. He writes, “For example, the marginalized, who do not ordinarily participate in public debates, can in interview studies have their social situations and their viewpoints communicated to a larger audience” (Kvale, 2006, p. 481).

### **Participants**

To get an authentic understanding of what works in helping African American males be successfully academically, it was necessary to identify students who have achieved such feat. Through convenience sampling, I identified four high schools, with a population of at least 20% African American, from Central Alabama. Then I obtained permission from superintendents from four local high schools to allow school principals, guidance counselors and teachers to participate in this study. The guidance counselors from the selected high schools were asked to

identify two African American male students who have graduated from high school within the past two years and who meet one the following criteria:

- be enrolled in a two-year or four year college/university;
- be enlisted in the military;
- have obtained a career technical endorsement and is currently working in that field.

### **IRB Approval**

IRB approval from The University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board was sought for this study. The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that all human subject research be conducted in accordance with all federal, institutional, and ethical guidelines. In addition, IRB approval was sought from the participating schools' board of education: Martin High School--King City Schools; Frederick High School--Douglass County School; Aaron High School--Douglass County School; Medgars High School--Evers County School. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all data collected from the schools, including the names of all of the participants (schools, teachers, and students) were maintained by using pseudonyms.

After gaining IRB approval from the school board, conversations were made with the principal--to explain this research and its intent. My point of contact was the principal and the guidance counselor, who helped me identify student participants to participate in this study. Upon gaining approval from the school board and the support of the principal, letters were sent to each school's guidance counselor and principal school who then identified two African American male students from their schools. Once students were identified, letters were mailed and emailed to them, explaining the research, their role in this study, and consent to participate. A total of eight students were interviewed.

In addition, the eight African American male interviewees were tasked with identifying teachers they believe employ effective instructional practices that help to improve the academic

performance of African American males. All eight teachers identified by the students were asked to participate in the study. Teachers who were selected by the student participants also received a letter, followed by a phone call and/or email communication explaining the study and requesting their participation. A total of seven teachers were interviewed.

Consent letters were used to inform the potential participants of the purpose, intent and importance of the study. Information about the significance of the study was also shared with the participants. The researcher obtained signed consent from participants (teachers and former students); participation in the study was voluntary. From the 15 returned signed consent forms, eight students and seven teachers agreed to participate in the research.

Because I was using human subjects, confidentiality was of high priority. To guarantee such confidentiality, data collected through the interview process was maintained by using pseudonyms. Only the researcher knows which pseudonym correlates with which participant and schools/districts.

### **Participating Schools**

#### **Martin High School, King City Schools**

Martin High School (MHS) is situated in the heart of its city. The school has a population of 685 students of which 47% participate in the federally free and reduced meal program. As with all high school students in Alabama, students at MHS are required to have instruction in English, mathematics, science, and social studies each year. MHS expands the learning options available to their students by offering additional opportunities for creative and analytical educational experiences, such as electives courses, advanced placement courses, dual enrollment college credit programs, and distance learning.

Of the 685 students that attend MHS, 35% (241 students) are African American, 61% (420 students) White. African American males make up 47% (114) of the African American population and 17% of the school population. MHS has 42 teachers on staff. 43% (18) of their teachers are males. The school also has eight African American teachers, 19% of the teacher population; of those eight teachers, four are African American male teachers, which make up 9.5% of the teacher population.

### **Frederick High School, Douglass County Schools**

Frederick High School (FHS) is one of seven high schools in the Douglass County School System. The school prides itself in its mission of preparing students with the skills needed to become productive and independent citizens. Located in rural Douglass County, FHS has a population of 532 in Grades 7-12. The school is a Title I school with 63% of the students participating in the free and reduced meal program.

Of the 532 students, 20% (104 students) are African American, while 755 (398 students) are White. Twelve percent (48 students) are African American male students.

### **Aaron High School, Douglass County Schools**

Aaron High School (AHS) is a member of the Douglass County School System. The school aims to develop and maintain an environment which will meet the academic, social, and moral needs of all students. The school is situated in the suburban community of Jamestown and has a population of 378 students in Grades 9-12. Seventy-one percent of the students attending AHS participate in the free and reduced meal program.

Of the 378 students enrolled at AHS, 45% (169 students) are African American, while 48% are White. African American males make up 23% (88 students) of the total population. More than half of the teachers on staff are males (52%); 95% are White males compared to 5%

African American males. Of the teaching population, 90% are White and 10% are African American.

**Medgar High School, Evers City Schools**

Medgar High School (MHS) is considered the flagship of the Evers City School District. The school is located in the county seat of Evers County. It has a population of 506 students in Grades 9-12. The school is a Title I school with 77% of its students participating in the federally funded free and reduced meal program.

Of the 506 students enrolled at MHS, 73% (368 students) are African American, while 24% are White. African American males make up 40% (201 students) of the total population. The school has 36 teachers on staff, in which half of the teachers are males (50%); 36% (13 teachers) are African American males compared to 14% (5 teachers) are White males. Of the teaching population, 53% are White and 47% are African American.

Table 1

*Participating Schools and Districts and Their Demographics*

School	District	Total Population	% AA Males
Martin High School	King City Schools	685	17%
Frederick High School	Douglass County Schools	532	12%
Aaron High School	Douglass County Schools	378	23%
Medgar High School	Evers City Schools	506	40%

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this practical qualitative study was primarily informed by participants’ interviews. As a result, information collected was used to identify common themes as it relates to teacher practices that improve the academic success of African American males.

The interviews are the most significant sources of information for this study. Two separate interview approaches were used for data collection: student interviews and teacher interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### **Student Interviews**

A one-hour interview was conducted with each of these students for the purpose of identifying successful strategies or classroom practices they believe to be effective for improving academic performance for African American males. The students were given several prompts to engage them in the discussion. Students were to also identify a teacher from their high school whom they consider to be effective at teaching African American males. After interviewing teachers and all of the students, a 30-minute follow-up interview was conducted. After the data were analyzed, students were contacted again to answer additional questions or to bring clarity to an answer they had given to a particular question.

### **Teacher Interviews**

After interviewing students, the second round of interviews was the teachers that were identified by students who participated in the student interviews. The goal was to have interviewed all eight teachers; however, only seven teachers agreed to participate. A one hour interview was conducted with these teachers for the purpose of exploring their experiences with working with African American male students and to gain their reflection about their teaching practices that lead to academic success. After the data were analyzed, teachers were contacted again to answer additional questions or to bring clarity to an answer they had given to a particular question.

## **Data Analysis**

The purpose of data analysis is to establish meaning to a particular research question (Hatch, 2002). In qualitative research, data analysis is a way to process qualitative data so that information learned can be effectively communicated to others (Hatch, 2002). According to Hatch (2002),

Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It . . . involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. (p. 148)

Corbin and Strauss (2008) define data analysis as a process of examining something to discover more about it and how it functions. They further view data analysis as a dynamic process, one in which the researcher has to “brainstorm, try out different ideas, eliminate some, and expand upon others before arriving at any conclusions” (p. 46). As Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out,

There are many different stories that can be constructed from data. How an analyst puts together the concepts often requires many tries before the story or findings “feel right” to him or her. Feeling right is a gut feeling. It means that after being immersed in the data the researcher believes that the findings reflect the ‘essence’ of what participants are trying to convey, or represent one logical interpretation of data, as seen through the eyes of this particular analyst. (p. 47)

For this study, the participants included eight African American students (high school graduates) and seven teachers (as identified by the student participants). Each of the participants was interviewed. Those interviews were recorded via audio recording device and were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read four times, reviewed carefully, and coded. Creswell (2012) suggests that the researcher reads the transcripts several times to become fully immersed in the detail. The goal is for the researcher to get a sense of the interview (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) stated that “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and

organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data . . .” (p. 148).

Coding is the process of taking raw data and raising it to a conceptual level (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). “Coding is the verb,” according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), “and codes are the names given to the concepts derived through coding” (p. 66). Corbin and Strauss (2008) further argue,

coding is more than just a paraphrasing. It is more than just noting concepts in the margins of the field notes or making a list of codes as in a computer program. It involves interacting with data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data, and so on, and in doing so, deriving concepts to stand for those data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions. A researcher can think of coding a ‘mining’ the data, digging beneath the surface to discover the hidden treasures contained within data. (p. 66)

I began with the initial coding system. I took my data and tried examining my interviews word by word. Finding that to be so time consuming, I then examined the data line by line and also by paragraph. As I was coding the data, I underlined and highlighted major ideas that seemed pertinent to my research and recorded notes in the margins of the transcript. This helps the researcher in the “process of exploring the database” (Creswell, 2007, p. 151). The notes in the margin served as initial codes for my data. Some codes that were identified from both interview sets of students and teachers were music, movement, learning styles, communication, and involvement. Also, I had already determined preset codes for the data, such as connections, interactions, conversations, activities, and strategies. I noticed that from my data collected I had lots of codes and that would be too cumbersome of a task to properly code and categorize. Creswell (2007) suggests that researchers work with a short list which he calls lean coding and then expand the categories. I revisited my data again and began looking at what I was coding and

if those ideas that I coded actually answered the questions I was seeking to answer about my research. As a result of this lean coding, I began seeing a pattern of ideas.

After I finished the initial coding process, I then began to review the codes and look at how to place them into categories. To begin this process, I typed all of my codes in a spreadsheet (one sheet for students' data and one for teachers' data) and began looking at how to consolidate these ideas (separately). I looked at what codes were similar or communicated some of the same ideas, for example involvement, connections, communication. I then took all of those that were similar and grouped them together and began to create categories. For example, involvement, connections, and communication were a part of the category called teacher and student relationships. Codes were placed into several categories, such as caring adult advocate, collaboration, academic rigor, and beliefs about learning.

Once codes and categories had been established, I classified them into themes to form a common idea about the research. For example, the categories of relationship, caring adult advocate, collaboration were all classified under the theme of fostering a supportive learning system. The interviews of teachers and students were all transcribed and coded separately; however, I wanted to convey a common message of what both agreed as being successful practices that teachers can use to help African American males experience school success.

Creswell (2007) identifying no more than five to seven general themes.

My initial data coding began first with the student data. After coding and categorizing the student data and classifying themes, I used the results to guide my data analysis of the teachers' interviews. Although, I employed the same process for data analysis for the teachers' data set as I did for the students, I used the information from the student data analysis as preset codes and categories for the teachers' data.

## **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research requires the researcher to be an active participant in analyzing data: collection and interpretation of others' thoughts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researcher has a responsibility to give voice to his/her participants and to not impose his/her own assumptions in the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To foster trustworthiness in this research, I audio-recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Upon completion of the transcripts, I sent copies to the interviewees for them to review and verify the accuracy. Once the data had been collected and analyzed, I located scholarly research to support my findings.

## **Statement of Positionality**

I have currently spent more than 16 years working in K-12 education, including eight years as a high school English teacher, four years as a high school assistant principal, and four years as a building-level school principal (Pre-K-2nd grades). These experiences have given me keen insight into the data available to administrators and schools. As an administrator, I have an awesome responsibility of synthesizing and analyzing data for the purpose of improving instructional practices, as well as identifying students in need of academic and/or behavioral support.

In addition to the influence of my professional experience, my personal background and upbringing may bias my methodological approach. Growing up in rural Wilcox County, Alabama, as well as attending school there, I knew it was no secret that there existed separation of Blacks and Whites. I began my formal educational training and completed my high school studies in the Wilcox County Public School System, and I can literally count on one hand the number of White classmates I had during those 12 years. It was clearly understood that the Black

students all attended the public schools of Wilcox County, while the White students attended the private institutions there or public schools in the neighboring counties.

It was not until years later, after attending historically Black Talladega College and working in public education, that the “eyes of my understanding” began to open. My experiences at Talladega College made me more conscious of the existence of inequality and its corruptive influence in the field of education, as well as society. Upon completion of undergraduate studies at Talladega College, I was afforded the opportunity to work in my field as a teacher in three public school systems. Working in these three different systems has provided me the opportunity to make sense of those experiences from my youth.

Throughout life, I have been immersed in a culture that emphasized the importance of education and success. Although I have worked in other school systems--school systems where African American males were the minority, having attended predominantly all Black schools (K-12 and undergraduate) and having had the experiences of being taught predominantly by African American teachers contribute to a bias.

### **Summary**

Chapter III included six sections detailing the methodology used in this practical qualitative study: research question, research design, setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis. This research allowed me the opportunity to examine instructional practices African American males perceived contributed to their academic success and to identify teachers who make differences in the lives of these African American male students. Eight African American male students (recent graduates) and four high school counselors from four selected high schools participated in this study. Research data were recorded, transcribed, organized and

coded to find common themes and patterns in the interviews. Audiotapes and printed transcripts were stored for security purposes.

CHAPTER IV:  
DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from participant interviews as they related to the research questions composed for this study. The purpose of this study was to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. This chapter presents data from the study to answer the research questions guiding this investigation:

1. What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to their school achievement?
2. What are the teachers' practices that teachers say contribute to African American male school achievement?
3. How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and the teachers they identify as successful?

**Participants**

A total of 15 adults, representing four different high schools from Central Alabama, participated in this study. Eight of the participants were African American male (former) high school students who were identified as being successful because of completion from high school, in addition to one of the following: enrollment in college, enlistment in military, or participation in workforce, utilizing career technical endorsements from high school. Seven of the participants are high school teachers who were identified by the African American male (former students) participants as teachers who made significant impact on their African American male students. Participants represent four high schools from Central Alabama: four from Martin High School,

King City Schools; four from Frederick High School, Douglass County Schools; three (two students and one teacher) from Aaron High School, Douglass County Schools; and four from Medgars High School, Evers City Schools.

## **Profiles of Participants**

### **Former Student Participants**

**Malcolm** is 20 years of age and is a 2015 graduate of Martin High School. He is the only child born to his mother and father. Growing up, his mother was assumed the role of being his primary care-taker. His mom conceived him when she was in college; and as a result, she dropped out of college to raise him with very little support from his father. Although he knew his dad, his dad was not as involved in his life as Malcolm would have hoped. Malcolm describes his relationship with his dad as being a rocky one, one that was filled with lots of inconsistency from his father.

Despite his dad's lack of involvement, Malcolm was able to turn to other men in his community and church. With support from his pastor, community leaders, and teachers, Malcolm feels he was able to overcome what others like him were unable to overcome. He turned to sports as an outlet and quickly thrived in that area. His mom also pushed him to make school more important than sports. While in high school, Malcolm considered himself to be a student-athlete, with emphasis on student. During his high school years, he participated in several extracurricular activities, in which he played almost every sport: basketball, baseball, football, and track and field. He even served as captain of the football team and even received offers from several colleges to play football.

He was also enrolled in the advanced level courses and graduated with honors. Currently, Malcolm is enrolled at a prominent Historical Black College and University (HBCU) in Alabama

and is majoring in mechanical engineering with a minor in business administration. He plans to pursue a career in mechanical engineering and to also return to his hometown to help encourage and motivate other African American males.

**Garrett** is a 20 year old and is a 2015 graduate of Martin High School. He is the younger of two children born to his parents. Garrett is the product of a middle class home, with both of his parents having received college degrees. Additionally, his father is a veteran of the United States Army. In describing his high school experience, Garrett stated:

My experience at [King High School] was a good one. I played basketball; I took all AP courses . . . basically, it was a good learning environment. I was blessed to have good principals. They pushed the curriculum very well, and . . . we were at the point where we were starting the AP program. I was able to get a boosted curriculum--a little harder than the normal one. It's definitely prepared me for challenges I've seen since I've got to college.

When asked about the role teachers played in motivating him to succeed, Garrett responded, "a couple of teachers pushed me, but more so, I got it from parents. They [parents] had expectations . . . . By the time I got to school, it was already ingrained that you're going to do well." Accordingly, Garrett excelled in school, making outstanding grades his entire K-12 experience. In conversation, one could quickly tell that this young man is a very focused and conscientious individual. When school became challenging, he took initiative to seek assistance from teachers and others. He shared an experience about a class in which he needed more support. He would report to school early to get support from this particular teacher. Malcolm was a participant in several honor organizations. He also took advanced level courses, including AP courses. His greatest highlight from high school was graduating in the top three of his graduating class.

In addition to academics, Malcolm was a stellar athlete. He displayed his talent on the basketball court and the football teams. He viewed such participation as opportunities to engage

with his peers in something that is positive. Currently, Malcolm is enrolled at a predominately White institution (PWI) in Alabama. He received an academic scholarship to attend this school and pursuing a degree in aerospace engineering.

**Sidney** is a 19-year old and is 2016 graduate of Frederick High School. Sidney is the older of his parents' two children--the youngest, his sister, is actually his cousin that his parents adopted. Sidney grew up in a loving home under the care of his mom and dad. His mom has a college degree and is an elementary school teacher. In sharing about his school experience at FHS, Sidney stated,

It was an okay school, not challenging, very easy. Some of the teachers were kinda like iffy. Some were questionable, like if they [didn't] know what they were talking about, but others were pretty good. I had a pretty good math teacher and a pretty good history teacher. Overall, it was okay.

Among the many difficulties that Sidney has faced growing up, his parents' divorce was the most difficult. His parents divorced during his 10th grade year in high school. Sidney tried to suppress the pain but said that it was something that interrupted idea his normalcy. Despite the divorce, Sidney still had a decent relationship with his dad and was able to rely on teachers and church members for additional support.

Sidney stated that his mom pushed him to do well in school. He communicated that he was not allowed to bring bad grades home. As a result, that pushed him to work hard in his classes. When he did not know how to do the work, he would ask his teachers for assistance, and they would help him. He also talked about a program called ICU that his school had in place to help students who were not doing well. While some students abused the program, he used it to his advantage to get the assistance he needed.

Sidney was a member of the baseball and football teams at school. Besides having a love for the game of baseball, it was his coach that made him really want to stick with this sport. He

stated that his baseball coach always pushed him to give his all in the classroom and to be a better person. He once played basketball but gave it up because of perceived favoritism that coaches had for other students.

Sidney performed well on the athletic fields, as well as the classroom. He took all advanced level courses and graduated high school with honors. His baseball talent helped him to gain a scholarship to play baseball at the collegiate level. Upon graduating high school, Sidney enrolled at an HBCU in Alabama but transferred at the end of the year. Currently, he is enrolled at a 2-year college (also in Alabama). He is majoring in child development and hopes to become a teacher and a coach.

**Benjamin** is a 20-year old and is a 2016 graduate of Frederick High School. Benjamin is the only child born to his mother and father. Both of his parents are college graduates and have professional careers. His parents instilled in him the value of hard work and self-pride. In discussing his major influencer in life, he talked about his dad. His dad is his role-model and example of what a man should be. However, he shared that he wishes his school would have had a mentoring program--one that would allow him to speak openly with another person about his college options.

Benjamin loves his high school and is appreciative of the experiences he had while there. He felt that his teachers were supportive and really wanted him to be successful in school and life. He stated, "The teachers really guided me. They gave me all tools I need for the next level, which is college." Evidence of the support from his parents and teachers could be seen in his high academic performance at school. Benjamin was a member of the honor society, as well as the math honor society. He took all advanced level courses in school, making no grades less than a B in all subjects, and he graduated from high school with honors.

In addition to academics, Benjamin was very involved in high school athletics--having participated on the basketball and track teams. His true love was basketball; to him, it is where he best displays his artistry in ball handling and ball distribution. He led his team in assists and steals and was selected as captain of the team his senior year.

Benjamin is also involved in his church, where he is an active member of his youth group. He considers his faith as being important to helping him stay focused in life. In addition to his church involvement, he is involved with a community based mentoring program called Legacy Club. The program is designed to mentor African American youth and to teach them skills such as job readiness, college prep, etiquette, etc.

Currently, Benjamin is enrolled at an HBCU in Alabama. He is pursuing a degree in occupational therapy. His goal is to eventually obtain an advanced level degree in his field and to open his own practice. Right now, he says that he is enjoying the college environment. He has never been in all Black school setting and feels that this experience is helping him to learn a lot about himself and his history.

**Langston** is a 20-year old and is a 2016 graduate of *Aaron High School*. Aaron is the oldest of his dad's three children. Aaron was raised by his dad, with assistance from his maternal and paternal grandparents. Initially, he shared very little about his mother, but eventually he of felt comfortable to share. Aaron's mom died when he was 5 years old; she was a victim of breast cancer. Aaron shared that this was very difficult for him, even at the age of 5, but his grandparents, especially his mom's parents, stepped up and made sure that he did not miss out on anything. His grandmothers assumed the role of being his mother; however, he felt that at times he still missed his mom because "there are only certain things a mom can give you and teach you." He also shared that he does not share this story with many because he "doesn't want

people feeling sorry for him.” He still struggles at times with his mom’s absence but is thankful for the love and support his dad and grandparents provide.

He views his experience in high school as being exciting. To him,

school was great. My high school was a good school. It wasn’t too easy, and it wasn’t too hard. It was somewhere in the middle, but you still learned a lot. So like a lot of stuff I learned in high school rolled over to college. I made a lot of good friends and then played sports, so that made it even better.

He felt that people at his school cared about him. He talked about the Black female counselor who was like the mother of the school. “She would check on me and see how I’m doing and if I needed anything, like did I do my scholarship applications or did I sign up for ACT. She just really cared.” He also talked about the assistant principal that was like the dad to so many African American boys at school. He stated that this assistant principal “taught us a lot of stuff like growing up as young men. He taught us lessons we need to learn for life.”

Langston stated that he was raised by his parents to be respectful and to give his best at all times. He stated that he had never been written up for misbehaving in school and had generally avoided following the crowd or being around people who cause trouble. Academically, he did well in school, having maintained a B average in his classes. He was on the advanced level track in school and took two AP level classes (English and History). He graduated high school with an advanced diploma but did not graduate with honors.

While in high school, Langston was a member of the basketball, football, and track teams. Not only was he a member of the team but he was also a leader on the field, serving as captain on both the football and basketball teams. Upon graduating high school, Langston enrolled at an HBCU in Alabama but later transferred to a PWI (also in Alabama). Currently, he is pursuing a degree in computer science. His goal is to pursue a career working in the field of cyber security.

**Paul Laurence** is a 20-year old and is a 2016 graduate of Aaron High School. He is the youngest of his parents' four children. His parents are very involved in his life, as well as their church. His father serves as a deacon and a Sunday school teacher, and his mom is a member of the choir. His parents raised him and his siblings in the church and to have a strong relationship with God. Paul Laurence considers his parents as being instrumental in his growth and development as a person.

Paul Laurence viewed school more as a social setting where he could connect with his friends and have fun. He was the jokester in the class but also the realist. He has a care-free demeanor about school and others' opinions. In discussing his high school, Paul Laurence stated,

It was fun most of the time, really. It really depends on who you are. Like if you like popular or whatever, it depends on how they going to treat you, pretty much. Or if a teacher already know you bad or you got a bad reputation, they probably going to look at you different, I guess.”

Trying to better understand his thoughts about school and teachers' views, the question about how he felt his teachers viewed him was asked. He responded,

They ain't look at me too bad. I ain't never get too disrespectful. Like, if you make a bad name for yourself in ninth grade, you probably going to have the same teacher in twelfth grade, so they already not going to like you. But I ain't never get to disrespectful with my teachers or nothing so they ain't really look at me bad.

Academically, Paul Laurence was an average student, maintaining grade average of a low C. He also did not participate on the advanced level track, citing that “I didn't want to push myself enough. I just wanted to have too much fun.” Most of his excitement about high school came from his participation in sports. He was talented athlete and displayed his craftsmanship on the football, basketball, and track teams.

Not having a definite plan for life after school, he enlisted in the Army because he knew he wanted to do something with his life. He shared his plans for college with a teacher. This

teacher helped him by sharing with him experiences his brother had while in the Army. This made him feel much better about his decision to join the Army. Besides joining the Army, Paul Laurence is currently enrolled at a 2-year college in Alabama and majoring in radiology.

**Ralph** is 21 years old and is a 2015 graduate of Medgars High School. He is the older of his mom's two children and the second oldest of his dad's four. He was raised primarily by his mom with lots of support and assistance from his dad. Although dad was not in the home, he played a major role in Ralph's life. Mom is a college graduate and works in the field of computer science. His parents are responsible for the person he has become in life. To him, they have given him all the tools he needs to be successful.

He shared that he really loved his high school experience. His teachers were nice to him and were very supportive. He also had lots of friends that made high school even more enjoyable. He felt that his high school prepared him for college and life. While in high school, he participated in several clubs and organizations, including honor society, math honor society, Spanish Club, and band. Band was the highlight of his high school career--having participated for six years. He played percussion and was a section leader.

Ralph was also a member of a local community mentoring program--*Legacy Club*. He and his family are very involved in his local church. His involvement included participating in the choir, the church's band, and the youth department.

Ralph was also on the advanced track in high school and took several AP classes, including English and history. He maintained a B average academically in all of his courses. Currently, he is enrolled at an HBCU in Alabama is pursuing a degree in animal science. His goal is to obtain a doctorate degree and open his own animal clinic.

**Claude** is 20 years old and is a 2015 graduate of Medgars High School. Claude is his mom's only child and the youngest of his dad's eight. Claude was raised by his mom, with no support from his dad. Claude shared about the struggles that his mom had to endure to help him get the many things he needed in life. Knowing that his mom was doing it by herself, Claude adopted the attitude of gratefulness. At times, he grew resentment toward his father because he felt that his dad could have done more. Even if he could not provide financially, he felt his dad could have been more involved in his life. He stated that he works hard now so that he can somehow show his mom that her sacrifices were worth it.

He viewed high school as a place where he where got to connect with people while learning the many skills needed for success. He enjoyed every moment of high school and felt that his involvement in activities and organizations made the experience even better. He was a member of the national honor society, the Spanish club, and Beta club. Additionally, he participated in high school athletics--serving on the football and track teams. What he loved most about sports is that he got to travel to a lot of different places, and he got to be around other men, primarily African American men, who became fathers to him.

Claude graduated high school with honors, having had participated in advanced level courses. He is currently enrolled at an HBCU in Alabama and is pursuing a degree in English. He hopes to one day become a high school English teacher.

Table 2

*Former Student Participants*

Students	Age	School	District	Year Grad.	Current Status
Malcolm	20	Martin High School	King City Schools	2015	HBCU
Garrett	20	Martin High School	King City Schools	2015	PWI
Sidney	19	Frederick High School	Douglass County Schools	2016	Community College
Benjamin	20	Frederick High School	Douglass County Schools	2016	HBCU
Langston	20	Aaron High School	Douglass County Schools	2016	PWI
Paul Laurence	20	Aaron High School	Douglass County Schools	2016	Military/Community College
Ralph	21	Medgars High School	Evers City Schools	2015	HBCU
Claude	20	Medgars High School	Evers City Schools	2015	HBCU

**Teacher Participants**

**James Weldon** is a 39-year-old African American male history and physical education teacher at Aaron High School. He has obtained a total of four degrees from three different universities. He has been in education for 11 years and has taught at three different high schools. He has taught World History, U.S. History I and II, economics, government, psychology, sociology, and physical education. In addition to teaching, he also serves as a football, soccer, and basketball coach. He is a very passionate teacher and gives his all to helping his students succeed in life. He considers himself a mentor to so many students and even acknowledges that some students call him uncle. He also feels that at times the weight of helping the African American males at school become successful is on his shoulder. This is because he is only one of a few African American teachers at his school--a school that has an overwhelming large

percentage of African American students. Although the weight is heavy, he is not shy of assuming such responsibility. In talking about education, James Weldon stated,

I believe education is the pillar to life. Therefore, teaching is the most vital aspect of a student's life, not just the course material, but the ability to make decisions that affect the overall process of lifelong learning.

**Booker T.** is a 44-year-old African American male history teacher at Martin High School. He has been in education for 10 years and has taught World History, U.S. History I and II, and eighth grade history; currently, he teaches U.S. History and psychology. He holds a B.S. degree in social science.

In addition to teaching, he has served as boys' basketball coach for both middle and high school. Booker T. is not only a teacher at the school, but he is also a product of the school system. He is known as a mentor for many of the African American males that attend his school. Some of the students refer to him as their pops and or uncle. He devotes a lot of his time to giving back to the community, such as volunteering as a coach for youth sports, providing Thanksgiving bags for families, and participating in the community tutorial program. He believes that it is his responsibility as a teacher to "awaken the creative expression and knowledge" of his students.

**Rosa** is a 53-year-old White female English/Language Arts teacher at Martin High School. Not only does she teach at Martin High School, but she is also a graduate of the school. She received her B.A. and M. Ed. in English.

She is in her 17th year of teaching. Currently, she teaches Advance and General English classes. She has done some work in the private school system but has spent the last 10 or more years in public education. Like Booker T., Rosa is a native of the community. She stated,

Striving to ensure that they [students] are prepared for their futures regarding their academic, social, emotional, physical, and critical thinking is imperative to me and my

profession. They must remain encouraged that they can and will accomplish their future goals and dreams; they must know that there are adults that believe in them to become capable, competent, and willing to do what is necessary to achieve greatness.

**Richard** is a 45-year-old African American male math teacher at Medgars High School. Not only does Richard teach at Medgars High School, but he is also a product of the school--having graduated from there almost 27 years ago. After graduating high school, Richard enrolled at an HBCU where he served as member of the basketball team.

He obtained a B.A. and an M.A. degree in mathematics, an Ed. S. in curriculum and instruction, and an add-on certification in instructional leadership. He has spent the entire 18 years of his career at Medgars High School.

He has also taught Algebra I and II, as well as Geometry. Currently, he teaches advanced mathematics: Calculus 2, Pre-Calculus, and dual enrollment. Richard also serves as head basketball coach and a football position coach. He believes that children thrive best when they have teachers who really want them to succeed. He stated,

I believe that students learn in different ways and at different rates. The classroom teacher must support their emotional, social, cultural, and emotional needs. Teachers must believe that all students can learn and they must display this belief through enthusiasm and passion for not only what they teach but also who they teach. It is my responsibility to provide a quality classroom experience in which children feel valued and respected.

**Harry** is a 45-year-old African American male band teacher and director at Medgars High School. Harry is also a product of Medgars High and graduated from there 27 years ago.

Harry attended three universities; two of which were HBCUs. He has been in education for 21 years and has worked in several (five to be exact) different school systems. Although he has worked in several schools, Medgars High School, his alma mater, has always been the place he wanted to serve most. He views it as an opportunity to pour back into his community--a community that invested so much in him during his adolescent years. Harry devotes a lot of his

time to building his community through his involvement in local community organizations and projects. In addition to being a teacher, he also serves as youth pastor at his church. He uses his faith as a guide in helping him model leadership and manhood for his students.

Currently, he teaches band at both the middle and high schools. He views teaching and learning as being connected to teachers' expectations. He believes that there is a correlation between teacher expectations (including involvement and investment) and student achievement.

**Thurgood** is a 31-year-old African American male Spanish teacher at *Frederick High School*. He has been in education for nine years and has taught Spanish I and II and physical education. He attended two universities and obtained the following degrees: B.S. in exercise science and wellness with a minor in Spanish and an M.A. and an Ed. S. in instructional leadership.

Thurgood is passionate about seeing his students succeed in every area of their lives. Because he is one of about two African American male teachers at his school, he has assumed the role of being a mentor and role-model to so many. He can be found early mornings having conversations with them about their future plans and/or decisions they have to make about everyday life. Currently, he serves as assistant principal at his school. Prior to this appointment, he served as basketball, football, and track coach. He believes that "every student is capable of excelling in school and in life. It's imperative that teachers set high expectations for all learners."

**George Washington** is a 31-year-old White male science teacher at Frederick High School. George Washington graduated from Frederick High School 13 years ago, where he excelled academically and athletically. He obtained a B.S. in general science and a M.S. in instructional leadership.

George Washington has been in education for nine years and has worked at three different high schools. He has taught advanced and general level courses in science from grades 10 through 12. Like several of the other participants, he is a product of the school and community. Additionally, he has served as a football and baseball coach at the school. George Washington believes that students have unique abilities and needs that require unique attention. He stated, “As educators it’s our responsibility to differentiate instruction in a way that allows for those unique abilities to be support.”

Table 3

*Teacher Participants*

Teachers	Age	Race	Gender	School	District	Subjects
James Weldon	39	Black	Male	Aaron High School	Douglass County Schools	History & P.E.
Booker T.	44	Black	Male	Martin High School	King City Schools	History
Rosa	53	White	Female	Martin High School	King City Schools	English/ Language Arts
Richard	45	Black	Male	Medgars High School	Evers City Schools	Math
Harry	45	Black	Male	Medgars High School	Evers City Schools	Band
Thurgood	31	Black	Male	Frederick High School	Douglass County Schools	Spanish & P.E.
George Washington	31	White	Male	Frederick High School	Douglass County Schools	Science

**Emerging Themes**

To identify themes for my study, I began by first identifying codes from the transcripts. Initial coding was more of an inductive analysis of the data. In essence, the first review of the data including coding all of the data without any regards to the research question. After looking at the data, I was able to identify important codes that helped in identifying unexpected findings;

however, a deductive analysis of the data, using the research questions as a guide, was necessary in order to successfully satisfy the goal of the research. After coding the data, categories were determined, and then sub-themes and themes were established from both students and teachers' perspectives. Six themes emerged from the students' data analysis. Those themes that emerged from the data were (1) cultivating a supportive learning environment, (2) fostering an environment of high expectations, (3) preparing students for life, (4) establishing an environment for active learning, (5) fostering an equitable learning environment, and (6) connection of curriculum to lived experiences. The five following themes emerged from the teachers' data analysis: (1) supportive learning culture, (2) active learning environment, (3) high expectations, (4) equitable learning environment, and (5) culturally relevant instruction.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Question 1: Successful Teachers' Practices Identified by African American Male Students**

Data collected from the interviews of the eight African American male former students were transcribed and coded. The initial coding included rereading the transcripts several times, examining the data line by line, and underlining and highlighting major ideas, as well as recording notes in the margins. After the codes were identified, categories were created. Once codes and categories were established, they were classified into themes. After analyzing the data from the students' interview transcripts, as well as paying close attention to manner in which participants responded to the interview questions, the following six themes emerged: (1) cultivating a supportive learning environment, (2) fostering an environment of high expectations, (3) preparing students for life, (4) establishing an environment for active learning, (5) fostering an equitable learning environment, and (6) connection of curriculum to lived experiences.

Table 4

*Former Student Participants' Themes*

Themes Derived from Students' Data	Sub-Themes
1. Cultivate supportive learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship building</li> <li>• Supportive adult advocate</li> <li>• Motivation to succeed</li> </ul>
2. Foster an environment of high expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers' beliefs</li> <li>• Academic Rigor</li> </ul>
3. Prepare students for life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on making better person</li> <li>• Focus on citizenry</li> <li>• Lessons for life</li> <li>• Connect lessons to life</li> </ul>
4. Establish an environment for active learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging lessons/instruction</li> <li>• Use of various strategies</li> <li>• Relevant content</li> </ul>
5. Foster an equitable learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiated Instruction</li> <li>• Multiple learning styles</li> <li>• Connection of instruction to interests</li> </ul>
6. Connect the curriculum to students' lived experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to African American male teacher</li> <li>• Awareness of societal injustices</li> <li>• Connection of instruction to African American struggles</li> </ul>

**Supportive Learning System**

All of the student participants felt that the support that teachers offer is vital to school achievement for African American male students. This supportive learning environment, from data, should be one that fosters positive relationships with teachers and students, as well as among students. A supportive learning environment should not be limited to a single classroom but should be pervasive in the school, where students are afforded the opportunities to have caring adult advocates and are motivated to succeed.

## Relationships

Relationships with teachers are a key component to school achievement for African American males. In discussing a teacher that truly connected with him, one participant (Malcolm) said the following:

He knew me. . . . We connected through basketball and also other events and things like that. He was a good teacher and role model for me, as far as he was a good successful African American man. He was involved in extracurricular activities, as well. . . . He always kept me pushing, told me to stand out, be the difference, don't mix with the crowd, don't be a statistic.

The student spoke about how his teachers took personal interest in him. He shared about how one particular teacher took the time to invest time in him by showing up at community events, talking to him in the hallways, offering words of encouragement, and pushing him academically and athletically.

Malcolm particularly talked about one teacher and how he and the teacher knew each other, since he had the teacher in Grade 7 and again in Grades 9 and 10. The teacher expressed an interest in him and that, according to Malcolm, made him want to try even harder, but it was not just this teacher. There were other teachers that fostered a strong relationship with Malcolm that he felt helped to push him to want to succeed in school and life. According to Malcolm,

[Mrs. Teacher B] was a great teacher. She was Caucasian, but she was so great! Me and [Mrs. Teacher B] clicked the first time we seen each other. I don't know what it was; it was just like we always knew each other. She was just like a mom to me. She always did the little things, asked me what I was eating for lunch today. And I would ask her, as well, if I had some spare change, 'What you want for lunch?' We always had good relationship, and we still do. And she still texts me and makes sure I'm doing good on my English papers and stuff like that in school. I remember my freshmen year, my first semester, she actually made me send her like my first four or five English papers to her in email, and she showed them to her classes in high school. I just thought it was good she thought highly of me.

Garrett viewed this idea of relationship as being part of the reason why he was able to make a transition to another college. This relationship did not just happen with his teacher, but also with a certain other school personnel. In describing their relationship, he added:

Mrs. [Employee A] was there for me. She helped me a lot. She helped me with the whole transfer process from [one school to another]. Even though I'm not in high school anymore, she's still always there for me."

He even spoke of another teacher, who was also a coach. This coach/teacher was his baseball coach and science teacher, but he connected with him very well. Sidney acknowledged that this teacher/coach was there for him at school and away from school and invested time to talk to him about life. In summing up his relationship about this teacher, Sidney stated,

He was my coach so outside the classroom, I saw him on the field. He was just always there. Like, a lot of the coaches, at the school, had favoritism, favorite; yeah, they had favorites, and I don't know. He just didn't put with that; everybody was equal, and I really respected him for that. He really impacted my life.

Benjamin felt that one teacher that connected well with him and most other students was an African American male teacher. This teacher would engage in conversations with him and others throughout the day. Accordingly, the teacher would ask about their day and how they were doing. Benjamin stated, "He really took care of me. He acted as if I was his own son."

Langston shared about two important figures from high school who really built a lasting relationship with him. He spoke of an administrator that helped him and others. In discussing this administrator, Langston stated,

We got connected to him real close. . . . He taught us a lot of stuff like growing up as young men. He taught us lessons we needed to learn. He would mentor us. He was tough on us. So any mistake that we did, he would be tough on us . . . he would be tough on us . . . because he know that it would be different in the real world. It would be harder on us, so he was harder on us sometimes. He took us on a trip and would mentor us.

It was not just an administrator, however, that fostered a strong relationship with students, according to Langston. There was one teacher particularly that worked hard to really connect with his students. As Langston explained,

He was a teacher that we could relate to, and then he helped us a lot on stuff that was more than--it was out of school stuff. He helped us a lot in the classroom, but at the same time, he helped us--he cared about us outside of the classroom . . . he helped us grow more as men. He taught us life lessons and stuff like that--that we wouldn't have to go through ourselves. He would talk to us, on the field and after class time. . . . We'll talk about just life period.

In discussing his relationship with a strong connection from high school, Claude expressed the following:

I really didn't grow too fond of Sergeant because he's always--before I actually got to know him--he would, he would be fussing at people. And I didn't want to get in his way and get fussed at . . . he pulled me to the side and he was like, "Hey, how about being in ROTC?" And I was like, "No, because I didn't want to go to the army." He was like, "This has nothing to do with the army . . . this is under the army, but this has nothing to do with it. . . . Sign up for a semester with me, and I guarantee you're going to like it." So, I signed up; we have that first semester, and I kind of had to get used to wearing the uniform and shaving and basically stepping up more. One I got under him and got used to and comfortable around ROTC, it was like I could talk to him like he was my father figure, like I could sit down and talk to him or if we're having an issue in class or if people didn't want to listen, I could go talk to him. So it was like me and him had that father-son connection.

Claude also identified another teacher/coach from his school that connected with him and formed a meaningful relationship. In his conversation about this teacher, Claude acknowledged,

I dealt with him on the football field, so when I saw him, it was like, "Hey, you know, you push yourself in the classroom, that carries on the football field. You push yourself on the football field during practices then you'll be able to push yourself during your football game." So the way he expressed that to me, he was always talking to me before practice, talking to me before football games, talking to me in the hallway. You know, just giving me the understanding that the more you apply yourself, the better you'll understand or the better you'll see your vision clearer, basically. He just connected with me.

## **Supportive Adult Advocate**

The student participants discussed how their schools did not have any formalized mentoring program, but their teachers did mentor them to some extent. They expressed how their teachers acted as a supportive contact for them while in school. Outside of having a great relationship with their teachers, they knew that these teachers were supportive of them and their dreams. Malcolm talked about an English teacher that pushed him to be better, not only in class but also outside of class and even in college. This teacher would go the extra mile to make sure that he was making every effort to fulfill his goals. He recalled his relationship with his English teacher,

She would say, “[Student], well we’re going to make sure you go to college; we’re going to make sure you at least go to the military. Your potential is way more than just graduating high school.” She was just like a mom to me.

Malcolm viewed one of his teachers, a history teacher, as a person who was like a mentor to him. This teacher was a strong supporter for him. Malcolm felt like, while he was in school, he had at least one adult advocate, and that advocate was this teacher. He did not limit his interactions to him to just school and sports.

We connected through basketball, and also other events and things like that. He was involved in extracurricular activities and in the community. He always kept me pushing, told me to stand out, be the difference. He would always ask me, “What you got going on with you? What you thinking about doing when you graduate? What you thinking about doing the next step in life?” He always asked me where my head was. (Malcolm)

Not only is support rendered by helping students stay focused on their goals beyond high school but also by in numerous of other ways. Marcus recalled having a teacher in high school that would come to school about 45 minutes earlier to tutor him and/or provide him more instructional support. He also talked about having teachers that would commit to staying after school when he needed extra academic support. These teachers would also show their support of

him by writing recommendation letters, proofing scholarship essays, and helping to complete college applications.

Ralph also talked about how his teachers showered their support on him. A lot of his teachers also helped him with his college applications and recommendation letters. His teachers helped him get into college. They were also there like family to him. His teachers knew his parents and his sister.

Benjamin shared that he had a teacher and administrator that offered support to him. These two individuals, according to Benjamin, would always encourage him, reminding him that he could accomplish anything he set his mind to accomplish. To him, this helped because he felt like the support these educators offered was genuine. He even shared how these two educators made an effort to get to know him, and how they gave of their time to support him by showing up at his games and reviewing his college applications.

Langston felt like he had at least one adult advocate at his high school. He shared about the time he expressed his plans with this advocate.

I remember when I told him I was going to the Army. He was just telling me I can do it and telling me stories about how his brother went to the Army and stuff and how to get through basic training and stuff. We were just talking regular. We had good talks. I felt like he understood. You could tell he actually cared about us, like he doing this because he like us not just because he trying to get paid.

They helped me get scholarships; they helped me look for something I like to do. Or they always looked at my interests instead of it just being about their class. I had a biology teacher; she understood that I really don't like science. But she knew that my heart wasn't really in, so it's like she helped me find something that fit me. So when she starting giving us papers, when she saw how well I wrote, she said, 'Well, have you thought about taking an interest in English?' She got connected with a couple of English teachers, and she helped me start writing on this portfolio. And basically, the portfolio turned into a journal. (Claude)

## **Motivation to Succeed**

The student participants felt that their teachers served as motivators for them. They felt inspired by the teachers' experiences, ability to get on their levels, willingness to be open, and words of wisdom. In his interview, Malcolm's eyes glistened and a huge smile appeared as he began to talk about the impact that Booker T. had on his life. Booker T., to Malcolm, was teacher, a counselor, a role-model, a coach, and an inspiration. Malcolm stated that Booker T. inspired him to want to achieve and be more. He was the example for what an African American male should be. Malcolm stated,

He was good role model for me, a good successful African American man. He is married, has a career, and is teaching. He always kept pushing me, telling me to stand out, be the difference, don't mix with the crowd, don't be a statistic.

His account did not end with Booker T., but he also talked about other educators at his school that motivated him and inspired him, like the library-media specialist who would often check on him to make sure he was on top of his studies and was not getting into trouble; his English teacher Rosa who he considered to be his school mom and who kept reminding him every day that he could do it because he is smart.

Claude also expressed how his teachers motivated him to succeed. Growing up without a father, school and sports provided him with the opportunity to have "many fathers." He stated that his teachers, especially his coaches taught him to "not be a statistic, to be the best, and to graduate from high school and do something great." He stated,

I looked up to them [coaches] as being basically father figures in school and basically being a father figure outside of school. I knew that if I needed something then I could ask of them for that. They inspired to want to be a better person and one day a better father than my dad was to me.

The students even expressed how the motivation did not necessarily come by way of nice or pampering words but also by tough love. Malcolm explained,

He [Booker T.] was always like the alpha male in his classroom; he always made sure he was the dominant force in his classroom, making sure he always had the students' attention. He made learning fun, but when it came down to business, he was always serious. You ain't exempt from getting it trouble or nothing like that; he treated everyone fairly.

### **Fostering an Environment of High Expectations**

Teachers setting high expectations for learning and communicating high hopes for students is significant to African American males' success in school. Many of the former student participants felt that their teachers had high hopes and expectations for them. High expectations should be evident through teachers' beliefs that students can learn and are engaged in rigorous and high-quality work. These expectations were communicated not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom.

#### **Teachers' Beliefs**

Although the students believed that their teachers had high expectations for them, the way those expectations were communicated were a little vague. When asked if their teachers had high expectations for them and how those expectations were communicated, many of the participants responded accordingly,

Well, my [subject] teacher told us all the time that if we made anything less than a C, you could not march, you could not be on the field, so that was a way of him communicating that he wanted us to be successful but at the same time making it disciplinary. (Ralph)

If I didn't do well on an assignment, they'd give it back, because they knew that I was a very smart kid, and they knew my potential and the work that I was capable of doing. If I didn't do something that was of the par, they'd give it back and would tell me, 'You know you could have did way better than that, and next time, you better do better'. They expected more out of me in the classroom first, because they always told me that my books came first before anything athletically or anything socially. (Malcolm)

He'd tell us every day that he expected us to. Like if he caught you doing something in school, he would say he expected you to do more than. He didn't expect you do that; he would expect you to be above that. Say if he whole class overall, he felt the whole class overall didn't do the best they could, he would make everybody retake the test. (Benjamin)

They definitely had high expectations for me . . . they communicated with me through their work ethic, not necessarily mine, you know. It wasn't like I was getting a huge push from my teachers. They just showed me they cared and that was honestly all it took. (Marcus)

He always told me, "Just be better than you were yesterday." That's one thing he always said, "Be better than you were yesterday. Don't make the same mistake you did yesterday." That's one thing that always just . . . kept me from comparing myself to others. (Malcolm)

The former student participants expressed that their teachers set high expectations for them; however, they were not real clear on what those expectations and hopes were. They knew that their teachers wanted them to be successful and to do well in school. They also knew that their teachers would support them in their efforts to succeed in the classroom, but the vagueness came in exactly what those expectations were, how they related to life beyond the classroom, and how they were communicated. At least two participants felt that a few teachers set high expectations for their learning, but overall, the teachers did not.

### **Academic Rigor**

Most of the student participants, about seven of the eight, were all on the advance track, in which they mostly took honors or Advance Placement courses. Students took classes like advanced chemistry, calculus, advanced world history, AP Government, etc. Malcolm discussed how his teachers would force him to think critically. He reflected on having to read a book in his Advanced English class. He was not a much of a student that loved reading, but this teacher required him to read the book and even taught the book in a way in which it captivated his attention. He recalled learning lessons from the book that he now carries with him in life.

Marcus discussed taking advanced classes in English, but, perhaps, one subject that stood out the most was his engineering class. The student discussed learning how to complete computer aided design, as well as designing catapults and projectiles.

## Preparing Students for Life

The student participants also acknowledged that teachers' focus on preparing them for life, not just college and careers, is an integral component to student success for African American males. The teacher, according to Malcolm, was not just interested in making him a better student, but was interested in making him a better man. In continuing his discussion about this teacher, Malcolm, said the following about this teacher:

In high school, he taught me that small things matter, as far as how to be a respectful Black man, how to stand out, how to hold your chest up, hold your head up even higher, walk firmly, and just the small things. "Yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am, no ma'am." Look people in the eye always. Not that my mama didn't already teach me, but he amplified it and made sure that I knew it, and told me how far it goes. And it goes a long way. It's not just a firm handshake, it's a firm handshake and more, and he looks at you as more affirmed gentleman-type thing.

Langston and Paul Laurence acknowledged that their teacher focused on making them better men. Langston mentioned that the teacher taught him and his classmates' life lessons that could be carried over beyond the confines of the classroom or school building/grounds.

Benjamin communicated,

But if we see him, like come in his classroom another time, we'll talk about just life period, and he'll teach us about different stuff. How he grew up. He could relate to exactly how we growing up at the same time. So, he know, if we go through the same thing that he went through when he was younger, he can teach us lessons and stuff about how it happened when he was younger, so we won't have to go through it ourselves.

Langston also talked about how one of his teachers took time out of class to help a student who had just become a father. To help the student understand his new role, the teacher shared his own experiences about being a father and gave the young man pointers and suggestions of what he need to do to fulfill this new responsibility. Paul Laurence, in talking about this same teacher and others at his school, share that the teachers wanted them to be respectful to others, to be kind--

treat people like you want to be treated, and to embrace differences--accepting the fact that not all people are the same.

Benjamin stated that his teachers taught him to look at school as a job. He felt as though his teachers made sure that he knew that coming to school was important and that he would learn lessons that would carry him through life. To him, one of the many life skills he developed through high school was commitment--sticking to what one starts. In his words,

Like my mom and dad, they can't skip out of work just because they not feeling good that day. I can't skip an assignment just because I don't feel like doing it. At the end of the day, school was a job.

### **Establishing an Environment for Active Learning**

Many of the student participants felt that they do well in class when the environment for learning is active--where students are engaged in high-quality work; they believe that engagement--the extent to which the learner is actively involved in the learning process - is another key component to achievement for African American males. For the most part, the student participants discussed engagement in terms of the teachers' ability to captivate their attention or to make them become more involved or connected to the lesson.

Most of the student participants were athletes in high school. As a result, many of them talked about how their teachers used sport analogies as a strategy or technique to connect or engage them with the content. No matter the strategy, the students felt that part of the reason they were successful is because teachers made the lessons connect with them. Malcolm responded to a question about one of his most memorable lessons a teacher taught in high school. He began by remembering the lesson on the Holocaust. When asked what it was about the lesson that grabbed his attention and engaged him, he responded,

Images! Cruel images, like as far as how the Jews were treated and just the habitats that they stayed in. First of all, he [teacher] asked us questions. He first grabbed our attention by asking the classroom questions as far as, he was like, "Does anyone know Adolf

Hitler? Does anyone know about the Jew Holocaust? Does anyone know how many people died from the Jew Holocaust?" Then once the classroom gave their opinions, he started with the facts, and then he came following--he showed us the images. One thing I was thinking about, me personally, . . . is just how bad they were treated, and not only that, to know that we weren't the only--African Americans weren't the only people that were treated bad, because at that time, I didn't know.

Other than using images to engage students, Malcolm mentioned that his teachers also used technology as a tool to keep students actively involved. Malcolm also mentioned how his teacher would ask probing questions, trying to get them to dig deeper into the content. In addition, the teacher would divide them up into groups and have them role play history.

The teacher, according to Malcolm, would also incorporate movement, role play, and cooperative learning.

Other ways that he would catch our attention were PowerPoint and stuff like that. It wouldn't just be like coming in class, just sitting down the whole time, he'd break us up in groups sometimes and tell us, 'Stand over there.' And we're these set of people today in history. Then he'll make us tell our own story. . . . One day, we'll come in class, and it'll just be like a piece of paper on the desk telling us what to do, the assignment, and how to come prepared to class tomorrow. He'd just mix it up different ways; it wouldn't be just repetitive stuff all the time, like the normal teacher. (Malcolm)

Marcus discussed how one of his teachers made learning fun. This particular teacher used competition as a way to engage students in the lesson. This teacher, for example,

knew the dynamics of the class. A lot of teachers, they're cut and dry with their methods for teaching; he was very fluid in the way he talked. . . . If something didn't work, he was trying to figure out why it didn't work, you know? He use to play; we use to play games... Some days you would get in there and wouldn't realize you were in class. (Marcus)

Benjamin and Langston shared about a particular history teacher who used games and other role play type activities to engage them. Benjamin and Langston reflected on this teachers' approach to teaching an economics lesson using the Monopoly board game. Students learned about investment, interest rates, etc. The same two students also shared about this same teacher teaching a lesson and wanted students to really dig into the lesson. To do so, he divided the class

into teams and they become news anchors. Each group was given a particular unit or story from the history lesson to own and present to the class. In addition to competition, another student discussed how one teacher made him love math again. To engage him and others, this teacher used

a lot interactions, a lot of one-on-one time with students. I learned and loved math again. I actually learned. I can't learn just sitting in a desk; it was one-on-one time that helped me learn. And she would come to our desks and help students. . . . (Garrett)

Benjamin shared how his teacher would sometimes use music as a way to connect students to the content. Using music allowed him to learn more quickly and to cause him to stay more engaged with the lesson. Likewise, Claude felt that his teachers' use of music was a way to connect with his classmates and him. One lesson he remembers the most was one that was taught by a history teacher. The lesson was about colonization, and the teacher used music and fashion as a way to discuss colonization. The teacher also discussed famous rappers, such as Migos, and compared them to historical figures, such as the pilgrims.

Claude stated that his teachers knew he had a strong interest in music. Claude also felt that his teacher engaged him by building on prior knowledge or experiences. He stated,

Everybody thought that history was just a boring subject; history repeats itself. So he [the teacher] was like, basically he broke it down in how history relates to the issues that we are dealing with today in society and issues that we're having in politics, government and all kinds of stuff--even sports, music, and music related artists. So, he basically made that connection from the past, you know. (Claude)

Another great example of how engagement was key to peaking students' interest in achievement was shared by Ralph. Ralph shared about an anatomy teacher at school who taught a lesson on the reproductive system.

She brought in a fetal pig, and so we were able to see all of the whole reproductive system from the pig. It was memorable because it was one of those things I got to touch. I got to actually physically see it. This was very important because it was a learning

experience about myself, because it taught me how easily I can remember. I can retain things from being able to be engaged with it. (Ralph)

Perhaps what made the teachers' lesson engaging was the fact that the teachers made the content relatable to the students. For many of them, the teachers presented the lessons in such a way that it made them want to learn more.

### **Relevant Content**

Many of the former student participants expressed their teachers made the lessons more engaging by making it relevant and relatable. Students are able to understand why learning such lesson is important and will have a greater willingness to fully engage in instruction.

In discussing one of his most memorable experiences in a teacher's class from high school, Marcus reflected on an engineering class. He mentioned that what made this lesson of most interest to him is the fact that it was more related to the field of math and science – subjects he liked most. He shared, “My favorite lessons were when we were doing the computer aided design. We were designing different things, like catapults and, you know, projectiles for different things.” Because he wanted to be an engineer, he expressed that this class and the lessons taught were important to him.

Benjamin also felt that his teachers made sure to explain the importance of learning the content in class. His teachers always began class with an agenda for the day. For him, this was important because he knew what he was going to be learning and what was expected of him. He also shared that his teacher, especially his Spanish teacher, would explain to him how Spanish (learning it) would help him later in life, especially in his chosen field of profession. More so, he felt that his teacher prepared him to embrace differences. Langston shared the same sentiments about his Spanish teacher. He shared,

We learned a lot about the culture, so I was engaged. It wasn't always just this and this word means this. It was more like she would start the day with a cultural lesson, basically

where we learned something about a different country, mostly a Spanish country. [We learned] things like their foods and regular cultural and everyday life. I feel like that was, sort of in a way, could be related to my life because you are learning their language. So it is helpful when there are people, Spanish people here. . . . You realize that they had to learn your language and your different culture. This class taught me to accept all people.

Claude said that his teacher made the lesson connect with his everyday experiences. He shared how his teacher would explain the lesson in such a way that he and everyone in class could understand it; but what made the lesson more awe-inspiring is that the teacher would be able to take that history lesson and compare it to the many issues of today, especially those societal issues and issues related to government and politics. Moreover, the teacher was also able to connect many of history lessons to sports, music, art, etc.

Claude also reflected on the lesson that a teacher taught him. The lesson focused more on the importance of working in community/collaboration. He reflected,

He had us do icebreakers, and he was like, you know, understand team work or working with others will help you understand concepts. He would be like, maybe you might have a hard time understanding it but your friend or someone else that's in the class with you might understand it better than you can.

He further elaborated on how he fell in love with English and what made him want to become an English teacher:

A student teacher had come in for like, basically like, three weeks, and we worked on the Harlem Renaissance. So that really opened up my eyes to a whole bunch of people that, you know, were basically down and out, coming from the South, moving up north and basically having to redefine themselves.

Malcolm, as aforementioned, discussed how his teacher made the lesson engaging and relevant for him and his classmates. This teacher would make the connection between history and everyday life. For this young man, he was able to gain an appreciation for this class because while learning about history, he felt as though he was also learning about himself. He also shared

how his teachers would remind him that the lessons he would be learning in their classrooms would be important for him when goes to college.

In speaking on the importance of lessons being relevant, Langston stated that teachers must make their lessons relevant. In the words of Langston,

Because otherwise they are not going to pay attention. Especially when you got everything else on your mind. When you in high school, you worry about everything else but class, so if you don't make it interesting and important, they not going to pay attention. They thinking about girls and boys and sports and what you going to do after school and after class. What you about to do when you on break, who you going to talk to at lunch. They thinking about everything else. So, if you don't hit something like a nerve or something to catch their eye, they ain't going to do nothing.

As Marcus summarized,

They gave you a reason for studying the material, not just to make a grade. They applied to somewhat, you know, you're going to need this in your life; it wasn't necessarily, I'm coming to class to do the assignment and then, you know, move to the next grade. It was, "Alright, when you get to college. . . . I'm preparing you for this, this, this, and this."

Although the responses from the students generally expressed that their teachers made the lessons relevant, there was very little indication that teachers made their curriculum responsive to the needs to their African American male students, especially as it related to connecting the curriculum to students culture.

### **Fostering an Equitable Learning Environment**

According to the participants, their teachers had unique ways of teaching them to make sure they were succeeding in school. Their teachers were attentive to the various ways in which they learned. Apparently, their teachers understood that not all students learned the same and that some students need multiple ways of instruction in order to understand the content. Marcus talked about how his teacher personalized instruction for him:

I had a teacher name [Mr. Teacher], and I think my favorite lessons were when we were doing computer aided design. It was just the fact that I could see; it was so tangible. We

use to learn, and one thing I like about this class right here, was that you could learn at your own pace. (Marcus)

Malcolm felt that his teachers knew how he best learned and constantly found ways to make sure he was afforded an opportunity to learn the way that best suited him. His teacher knew that he was a visual learner. They also knew that he did not like reading, but that he needed to see images or visuals. As he stated,

They did know that I was a visual learner. I learned from audio, as well, from hearing the information over and over. And they would make sure that I had the lesson. Like if the lesson was reading for the day, they would make sure that I read, but they would find a way to make it appeal to the way I learned. I still didn't like to read, but I had to.

Much like Malcolm, Ralph felt like he learned best by seeing and doing. He also felt that English was not his strongest subject; he was all about the sciences, especially since he was going to college to concentrate on animal science. He indicated,

They used to use a strategy where you hear it, you see it, and then you do it. That was helpful for somebody like me. I'm a science major, so things that an English major would be able to comprehend by just hearing it, you know just reading it or what, it won't click with me that way. I need to be able to see it, physically do it and see it. That's what my teachers did for me.

I feel like they all tried to teach in different ways. So that even if they didn't know exactly how I wanted to learn, they knew somebody in the classroom wanted to learn that way. So they taught in different kind of ways so they would touch everybody. But for me, I'm more of a hands-on learner. (Benjamin)

They knew I needed individual help. Like in [Mrs. Teacher's] class, that was my twelfth grade math teacher; she knew that just teaching everybody--that I'm going to need a different way, like you're going to have to dumb it down a little bit, and then once they finally showed me the dumbest way possible, then I'll know. And I'm like, oh you should've said that at first. (Langston)

### **Connection of Instruction to Students' Lived Experiences**

All of the student participants in the study were African American male, and they overwhelmingly identified African American male teachers (five of the seven teacher participants) and coaches (six of the seven participants) who pushed them to succeed in school.

The students looked at these male teachers and coaches as role models, mentors, and father figures, as some indicated. What was more important, however, is the connection the students felt to these African American teachers. This connection, although identified as key to relationship building, exists because the students feel as though, as Malcolm states, “he understands me. We connected. He was an African American male, and I’m an African American man. He was once in my shoes. It’s easy for us to relate.” Malcolm also shared how his teacher connected with his experiences. He stated,

I remember we was talking about basketball one day, and he was talking about one of my classmates. He was a post player, and he was just saying how he needs to be more aggressive under the rim, more firm under the rim, you know, just be more of a dominant force. He moved it to the aspect of life, as well. He was saying how you can’t just be a pushover in life. If you want something, you’ve got to get it, just like if you want that rebound you’ve got to go get it. This rubbed off on me, as far as reaching out and going after my goals in life. It wasn’t just about history. He taught his subjects and all, but if he could also convey something to relate to life and also give us life lesson and guidance skills, he would also do that. His class was good mixture of getting the books and also getting a life lesson.

Malcolm also expressed how his teacher made him aware of societal injustices that exist for him and other African American males. In speaking about his teacher, Malcolm stated, “He always told me how to handle situations; we can’t handle them like any other person could. He told me how to be a step above.” Malcolm stated that he appreciated this advice and support because he needed the guidance that he lacked from his father.

In another example, Malcolm discussed how his teacher connected his instruction to the struggles of African Americans. He shared about a lesson his teacher taught about the Holocaust and how the experiences of the Jews reminded him of the cruel treatment African Americans had endured in this country. Malcolm stated, “One of the things I was thinking about was just how bad they were treated, and not only that, but also to know that we weren’t the only people treated

bad. Because at the time, I didn't know." Malcolm talked about learning about the Civil War and Black Wall Street and how the lesson about Black Wall Street made him feel "proud and angry."

### **Summary of Former Students' Perspectives**

After the analysis of the data from former students' interviews, six themes arose: (1) cultivating a supportive learning environment, (2) fostering an environment of high expectations, (3) preparing students for life, (4) establishing an environment for active learning, (5) fostering an equitable learning environment, and (6) connection of curriculum to lived experiences.

### **Research Question 2: Successful Teachers' Practices Identified by Teachers**

Data collected from the interviews of the seven teacher participants were transcribed and coded. My initial data coding began with the student data. After coding and categorizing the student data and classifying themes, I used the results to guide my data analysis of the teachers' interviews. Similar to the data analysis of the students' transcripts, the initial coding for teachers' transcripts included rereading the transcripts several times, examining the data line by line, and underlining and highlighting major ideas, recording notes in the margins, and examining the data for comparisons to the students' data analysis. After analyzing the data from the teachers' interview transcripts, the following five themes emerged: (1) supportive learning culture, (2) active learning environment, (3) high expectations, (4) equitable learning environment, and (5) culturally relevant instruction.

Table 5

*Teacher Participants' Themes*

Themes from Teachers' Data Analysis	Sub-Themes
1. Foster supportive learning culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship building</li> <li>• Openness and transparency</li> <li>• Nurturing relationships</li> <li>• Caring adult advocate</li> <li>• Teacher as mentor</li> </ul>
2. Establish an active learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic engagement</li> <li>• Captivating students attention</li> <li>• Relatable content</li> <li>• Connection of lesson to interests</li> <li>• Relevant content</li> <li>• Connection to lived experiences</li> </ul>
3. Set high expectations for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to high-quality education</li> <li>• Focus on success</li> <li>• Preparation for next level (college, career, military, life)</li> <li>• Rigorous curriculum and instruction</li> <li>• Beliefs in students' ability</li> </ul>
4. Foster an equitable learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting various learning needs and styles</li> <li>• Differentiated instruction</li> <li>• Instructional strategies (i.e. scaffolding)</li> </ul>
5. Implement culturally relevant instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to historical and cultural experiences</li> <li>• Knowing the students' backgrounds</li> <li>• Connecting students to their history</li> </ul>

**Supportive Learning Environment**

Like the student participants, all of the teacher participants felt that students do well when they are in a supportive learning environment. As previously mentioned, this supportive learning environment, from the perspectives of the participants, should be one that fosters positive relationships with teachers and students, as well as among students.

## **Relationship Building**

Similar to the former student participants, the teachers viewed building strong healthy relationships with African American males as being instrumental to school success. The teachers conveyed the significance of fostering a loving and caring culture as being necessary to successful relationships. They felt that being personal and real with students, being open and honest with them, allow students to see them as caring adult advocates who have their best interest at heart.

When asked about how he connects with his students? James Weldon noted that he works hard to give his students the best of himself. In the interview, he responded,

It's all about relationship. And like I said, I feel like once I get the relationship with them, that the teaching part comes easy. I have a former student now that I'm really close to. It ends up being, he just all of a sudden started calling me uncle, and we got that relationship to this day.

Booker T. also highlighted the importance of relationship as key to African American males' success in school. This relationship is evident in his desire to be open and transparent, as well as loving to his children. He uses life's experiences to make meaningful and lasting connections with his students. To him, they are able to relate to him, and they see him as human.

I'm hard on them when I need to be, but I love them when they need to be loved on. I care for them when they need to be cared for because I had a stepdad growing up, and most of these young men don't. I try to be their [parent away from home]. I try to serve in place of their parents when they're at school, especially for the Black boys. I just try to be a role model for them, someone they can see. They see me outside of school because I was born here, and I still have a lot of family here. I'm out in the community, and when I leave school sometimes, I got out to different parts of the city. I go to the rec center. I form those relationships with them. I get to know them. (Booker T.)

I'm concerned about their lives as far as being men, whether it's at school or at home, wherever it is. I've tried to live by the quote that 'kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.' So, I try to make sure that they understand that I'm concerned about them. I just try to make sure that I treat them like they're my kids. I talk to them. (Harry)

This idea of fostering nurturing relationships is what Rosa uses to inspire students to pursue and accomplish their dreams. She reflected on one of her experiences with whom she was able to connect through encouragement. In her reflection, she stated:

Another student that I'd encouraged, encouraged, encouraged, encouraged to please do something came back as a Marine because I said, "Obviously, you don't wanna go to college, but you may want to go into the service and serve our country, and I would be so proud if you served our country." And, he came back in full dress uniform as a Marine last year, and he came to the class and spoke to the class and said, 'Thank God Mrs. Miller said I could do it.' They just need someone to say, first of all, at the beginning of the school year, "You're doing it because I said so," and then later, "You're doing it because I love you. You're doing it because I care. You're doing it because you have an incredible future, and it is right in front of you; that's why you're doing it." (Rosa)

In responding to the question about how teachers should build these relationships, several teachers offered their experiences about effective relationships and student achievement:

Plain and simple, get to know them. First and foremost, get to know them. Learn three things about them that make them kick. I mean it's usually going to be sports; it's going to be music, and it's going to be what's popular. And if you find out those three things. . . (James Weldon)

Spending time with them. Just letting them know that I'm there whether it's after class or before . . . just try to make sure they're exposed to as much stuff as possible. [Ask] them about what's going on at home; then, who are some of their role models, and what they want to be, what they want to do, and why they feel like this. [Teachers] need to know their kids . . . know their story . . . know what makes them tick and why they are the way they are. Everybody has a story. (Harry)

One of the strategies I try to use is relationship over authority. And what I mean by that, you've got to get to know them and you've got to meet them where they are. And you can't do it based on your position. You've got to know them as a person and them know you as a person. (Thurgood)

But when I start teaching, what I did then and what I do now is I make it personal by--I have to know something about them. I don't just want to know what their name is and who their parents are and that kind of stuff. And I don't listen to the cooler talk, the teacher talk, like that's a bad kid kinda talking. My thing is, you can say I'm a hard teacher or I'm an easy teacher or whatnot, but if it's personal, you going to learn. I look at it if that I'm learning from them as they're learning from me. (James Weldon)

## **Caring Adult Advocate**

Every child needs at least one caring adult at school that serves as an advocate and/a mentor for him or her (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddline, 2010). This advocate provides support and care for children in such a way that the child really feels as if he/she has a safety net at school. Booker T. serves as an advocate for many of his African American male students and helps them set their own goals by asking them tough questions about their future plans. From there, he expects them to follow through on what those plans are:

I'm on them about, "What are you planning on doing? What do you want to do when you graduate?" Some of these kids don't have an idea, so what I do is I'm talking to them every time I see them. "Hey, are you filling out those applications? Are you planning on going to school? Are you going to the military? Okay! Have you talked to the recruiter? Okay, what'd he say? Have you taken the ASVAB test? Have you filled out these scholarship applications?" I stay on them starting in 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, and I'm really on them 12<sup>th</sup> grade year about their future plans. I ask them, I stay on them, and I help them fill out applications. I help them fill out scholarship forms. Tutor a couple guys; I try to help them best I can because I have seen these guys grow up. I don't think they have a lot of positive male figures in their lives. When they come to school, they have at least one.

Rosa shared a touching story about that highlights the importance of being an adult advocate for students. Her story is recorded below:

Then another student who had an incredible talent of singing tenor. The most beautiful tenor voice I've ever heard. He's just a lovely, wonderful young man and could not afford college. So, I got on the phone with UM, and I said, "You have got to hear this voice." And, then I got him an appointment. And he and his mother traveled to Mobile and got an appointment with the dean of music school, and he tried out. And on the way home, he called me on his cell phone and said, "[Rosa], they heard my voice and said it is the best tenor voice they've heard in years, and I've got a full ride to school." And, he is a senior now at the UM.

Rosa has countless success stories where she has helped her students begin the journey of accomplishing their life goals. Her students come back often to show their appreciation and gratitude to her for not only forging a relationship with them but for being their support system at school and believing that they are capable of succeeding at high levels.

All of the teacher participants had similar success stories where students, in this case, African American male students, trusted them to be their adult advocate. These teachers gave ear to their voices and cries for someone to believe in them and to invest their time and energy into pushing them to make their dreams a reality.

Most of the participants shared stories about students coming for additional academic support and how they added extra time to their day to assist academically. Some talked about sharing their personal experiences with students and being transparent with them about their journey to success. Most importantly, the many participants talked about being a role model, a parent, a mentor to their African American male students.

### **Active Learning Environment**

Many of the teachers in class expressed the importance of captivating students' attention in the classroom. This notion of engagement also involves a high level of student involvement and curiosity. It has to do with students feeling optimistic about the instruction and that the instruction connects with them in some way. Some of the participants spoke about the importance of engaging students in the lesson through using various formative assessment tools, such as exit slips or thumbs up, thumbs down.

In her class, Rosa engages her students in the lesson by making the content relatable to their everyday experiences. When reading novels, students are able to make the connection with various subjects and themes and compare those with their own daily encounters. What's probably most exciting is that the teacher, while reading, becomes animated so that the students can really capture the feel of the text. The teacher also engages her students in dialogue about various topics of study. Even more, the teacher provides them with an agenda to let them know what they are learning and its importance.

Most of the teachers in this study are coaches. As a result, a few of them use sports as a way to engage their students. Richard, a math teacher, talked about how he tries to connect the lessons to sports for those students that are into athletics. He even calls his daily math work, warm-ups because, like in sports, it gets students to start preparing themselves for the work that is ahead. As Richard stated, “Before you start practicing, you would do your exercises, your warm-ups. That’s why I call it warm-ups. Get their mind thinking a little bit. Get it running.” In addition to using sports, Richard also uses technology as a tool to engage students in learning.

Still, teachers like Thurgood and Harry know that their students love music. They use music in their instruction as a way to peak students’ interest in the lesson. Thurgood often plays salsa music and have students listen to it as they enter the room. In the interim, he stands at the door and greets each student with a Spanish salutation, fostering a warm and welcoming environment for students.

A few of the other teachers used competition as a way to engage their students. The teachers feel that most of the African American male students or boys, in general, thrive off of competition, so they try to provide instruction in a way that students feel like they are trying to win something. As James Weldon emphasized, it’s important to make lessons relevant and relatable, as well as exciting. In his words, teachers should, “Make your lessons or your teaching style a little more relatable to the kids, because kids don’t like school. So, I try to make it fun, but we learn at the same time.”

### **Relevant Content**

Another key theme that emerged from the teachers’ interviews was relevance. Most of the teachers indicated that they are intentional in preparing and delivering instruction that connects to their students’ lived experiences and/or culture, as well as interests, goals, and

aspirations. One of the ways Thurgood makes his Spanish lesson relevant is through exposing students to real life application.

Every year the principal would allow me to take my students on a field trip to a Mexican restaurant. And what I would do, I would build on off of it all year, and I would get them to realize . . . hey, this is what we're learning. You gonna use it when we go to the restaurant. (Thurgood)

Harry makes his lessons relevant to the lives of students also by exposing them to various genres of music. He works hard to make band a place where students can grow and develop as well-round individuals. In his interview, he stated:

The band is not big; the band is not the cool thing to do. It's good to play football. But most of the time, I do try to play music that is relevant to my students' culture. The other thing I do is I tell them that I have music for days that they can play; however, I make sure that they know how to read the music in order to play the music. So, if they want to play all the things they hear on the radio, which I have no issue with as long as the content is not out there, we can play it all day long. But, they have to learn how to play it...I understand that they want to play what their friends like to play, but I want to make sure that they can get a scholarship, if they so choose to do so.

Some other responses from the teacher participants also reflect their beliefs about the importance of relevant instruction to student achievement and success.

One time, I was teaching an economics lesson about finance and money management. I was talking about how Black males, and not just Black males but most Blacks as a whole, we don't teach our kids money skills. And we was going through it; I was explaining to them how I learned some of mine, and how I'm constantly reinventing myself with managing money and just taking care of my family. I will never forget this one kid started tying this stuff together, and he was like, he broke it down and we ended up talking, to be honest with you, we ended up getting off subject talking about the African American family. (Thurgood)

In my class, I teach history, but I like to teach life experiences, as well. I like to talk about life with my students, and I think that builds personal relationships because they think they get to see where I stand on certain issues, but I really don't give my point of view. I like to play the fence. I play the devil's advocate, and I like to get their viewpoint on issues, and that helps me to kind of relate to them back because I can kind of say, 'Okay, he or she, they are very conscious of what's going on, or they're very smart about particular topics. I'll say to my students, "I'm here to make you guys better people. The history that I teach you guys, you guys may retain some of it, but if you guys learn to be

better citizens, better people, better young adults, that would far supersede what I teach you in the history class.” (Booker T.)

Rosa also shared how she uses lessons from literature to connect with her students’ lived experiences.

I started talking about choices, because we are studying *Of Mice and Men*. And Curley is the boss’s son in the book, and he has a choice whether to treat people decently, or to mistreat people. And, Curley chooses to mistreat people no matter who they are. Because he’s the boss’s son, he has an attitude on his shoulders, and he just disrespects everyone he meets. And, Curley does this because of his relationship with his father. And, so I use Curley, as an example to make better choices, how to treat others, how to respect others, how not to be that person that when that person walks in a room that other people just don’t wanna see them at all . . . because that person has a reputation of just wanting to stir trouble. He wants to make others feel as though they’re never good enough. (Rosa)

I relate to their character choices. There are so many character choices...of how to live your life and how to choose to treat other people, and how to choose to think about yourself. There’s so many characters that they can relate to. One of my favorites is *The Color Purple*. “Why does Celie tell Harpo to be beat Sophia in that poignant moment, when they’re in the garden?” I’ve read it a so many times: And she looks up and Harpo goes, “I don’t know what I’m gonna do about Sophia.” And, she looks up Celie, who’s been abused and abused and abused, over and over and over, looks up at him and says, “Beat her.” I mean, the kids are like, their eyes get huge. And, I pause and ask, “Why does she say that? Why?” And, a kid raises his hand, one of my Black African American males, “That’s all she knows. . . . That’s all she knows.” And, then I start crying, everybody starts crying. We all mess up, we all do, but we all keep getting other chances. (Rosa)

While evidence exist from interviews that teachers worked to make their lessons relevant, evidence also indicated that, in certain cases, teachers skirted around the conversations of race and racism. When asked how race or racism comes up as a topic of conversation in class, a few of the participants shared that they try to avoid such topics because of its sensitive nature. Two teachers’ responses to this particular question are listed below:

It very seldom does, and I don’t know why. But right now the majority of the classes up here are Black kids, and the White students are minority. We really don’t have a bunch of situations in the classroom where race comes up.” (Richard)

Um, it really does not. It really hasn’t. It may come up with some of the literature we’ve read with *The Color Purple*, *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It

came up more so with *To Kill a Mockingbird* because of the young, Black man who gets accused of something he did not do at all. So, I think I handled that pretty well. I address it to go back to say that, “Thank goodness we’re in a world today where it’s a different world, where there’s not slavery anymore, where people are treated like human beings, and we are all created equal.” (Rosa)

George Washington acknowledged that the subject of race or racism never comes up as a topic of conversation in his classroom. On the contrary, three of the other teachers use this as an opportunity to teach children about respecting differences and understanding how race or racism affects society. James Weldon stated that he tries to discuss race or racism on a regular basis, especially when he teaches the Civil Rights Movement.

And it comes up in interracial dating. It comes up in the politics, so that’s something that it comes up a lot, especially when it’s an election that’s been like this previous one. You have people that’s obviously Republican and Democrat and that creates a huge debate. It’s pretty much a daily topic. (James Weldon)

Booker T. also stated that he leads the conversation about race in his classroom. From his perspective, race or racism is not a topic that should be avoided or treated as if it does not (or has not) exist. He views this as an opportunity for students to talk about their differences to dispel negative stereotypes and to begin to appreciate each other’s uniqueness.

Race, in my class I bring, in any part of history that I have ever taught, I bring from Native-American experiences during colonial times. I bring African American experiences. Of course, there’s European, and I bring everyone’s experience in. . . . I bring race into, not for the fact of trying to divide but the fact of this what really happened in history. . . . I put it on the table, and we deal with it. We talk about race, from the Civil War, Black codes, Jim Crow laws--all the way up. (Booker T.)

### **Setting High Expectations**

High expectations have to do with a teacher’s commitment and service to providing student with a quality education that is focused on learner outcomes and success (Howard, 2014). It also involves teachers’ commitment to rigorous instruction, with the belief that all students can learn at high levels and are capable of achieving success in school and in life. To gauge teachers’

level of expectations of their African American male students, the teacher participants were asked to describe what success looks like for their African American male students.

In response to this particular question, Harry was adamant that success does not always mean that a child has to go to college. To him, success for his African American student means that they leave him prepared, whether it is college, military, or the workforce. This preparation, from his perspective, also involves the development of necessary life skills, such as attitude, presentation, work ethics, etc. In addition to Harry's response, Booker T. adds that a part of being successful means being responsible. For him, he wants his students to always strive to be better than their parents and to become productive citizens, viable contributors to society.

Most of the participants shared the views of Booker T. and Harry. One teacher, James Weldon, added that success involves a high level of self-confidence and self-worth. George Washington stated that it meant growth – personal and educational. In general, the teacher participants believe that success for them is their students completing high school and are prepared for college, career, and life.

To prepare their students for college, career, and life success, the teachers take pride in providing a rigorous curriculum. To them, students need the skills necessary to compete in a global society. Many of the teachers shared that they hold students to high standards. When a task is given, students are expected to complete the task correctly.

In Rosa's classroom, all of her students are required to read novels. This includes her general English students, as well. She also uses the same content with her general student that she uses with her advanced students. Requiring students to read, write, collaborate, and discuss are all rigorous tasks that require students to connect, apply, create, synthesize, and critique.

What's more is that Rosa, not only requires her students to participate in these challenging assignments but she also expects them to do so. No one gets a pass on not completing their work.

James Weldon stated that he gives his students the best of himself. He conveys the message he has very high hopes and expectations for them. He makes it his aim to help his students to not only meet his expectations that he has set for them but to also exceed them. In his words,

I want my classroom to be organized chaos. I don't want it to be whereas you come in, you sit down, you got your pencil, you got your paperwork, and they do it every day. And they go under the radar because they wear them out, and they don't cause a disturbance. But you look at their grades, and it looks like they learned. At the end of the year, they can't tell you one thing they learned. And I mean, I kind of push the envelope with my minorities, especially.

### **Equitable Learning Environment**

The teacher participants in this study indicated that all students are different, and as a result, they all learn differently and need instruction that meets those varying learning needs and/or styles. Differentiation of instruction primarily has to do with providing students with different paths to learning. This is done in an effort to accommodate the varying ways that students learn best. Some students are visual learners; some may be kinesthetic learners. This idea of differentiated instruction may also be tied to students' preferred thinking domain. For instance, some students' preferred thinking is more social, while others may be more structural. Either way, providing students with access to multiple avenues of learning is beneficial to student success.

Rosa discussed how she provides lots of scaffolding. She works hard to identify her strugglers so that she can provide them with the support they need for their learning. George Washington shared an experience about a student in his class that loved music. He would allow

that student to wear his headphones in class during individual work time so that he could stay focused and complete his assigned task.

To try to figure out the best way to meet his students' needs, James Weldon admits that he uses a lot of trial and error. He employs multiple strategies to find which way works best for his students. He pulls students in small groups and works with them by rotating from group to group. They also get an opportunity to learn from others in their group. He makes provisions for his students learning styles.

The ones that can get into sitting down and they cannot take notes, and you notice they not taking notes, but when it comes for test time, they doing fairly well, I'll give them that leeway. Then you don't have to be like everybody else to learn. (James Weldon)

### **Culturally Relevant Instruction**

Most of the teachers in the study discussed the importance of implementing instruction that connects to students cultural and/or historical experiences. The teacher participants were asked about how they make their curriculum culturally relevant. In her response to this question, Rosa stated:

I try to make sure we have a very diverse reading curriculum across the board. I also take into consideration the diverse and multiple learning styles within all classes. I purposefully employ examples from former, successful African American male students, whether it be told through a real-life story/circumstance or a past essay.

In his response, Sidney discussed the importance of getting to know his students through conversations and interactions. He stated that,

I know that with Black males when I'm teaching, I tend to put a little more culture into some of the teachings. I will maybe put a little rap lyric in something or maybe say this person in history was kind of like Fetty Wap. I try to bring some of their culture into the instruction, trying to make it relatable to them or help them form connection with the content. Because they listen to certain music, they wear certain clothes, so I try to pull on that. I try to make my lessons culturally diverse. I pull from different sources to make this happen. As teachers, we have to cater, of course teach the curriculum, but we have to kind of cater to the history and culture of our kids. You have to make it where kids want

to come to your classroom and learn something because they can feel that you are relating your teaching back to me.

James Weldon mentioned that it's important to connect students to their historical past. As a history teacher, he constantly finds ways to help students explore topics of racial injustice, as well as other societal injustices. He does something he calls reverse teaching where he gives students various topics for research and conversations. The students research the topics and then participate in classroom discussions. The teacher mentioned that he sometimes has the students do role reversals, where the white students would be discussed from the Black perspective and the Black students from the White perspective. He views this as an opportunity for students to learn about each other and to empower them to use their voice to make significant changes.

### **Summary of Teachers' Perspectives**

The analysis of the data from teachers' interviews led to the emergence of five themes: (1) supportive learning culture, (2) active learning environment, (3) high expectations, (4) equitable learning environment, and (5) culturally relevant instruction.

### **Research Question 3: How Practices Lead to Student Success**

The student and teacher participants identified several practices that contribute to school achievement for African American male students. Those student participants identified the following practices as contributing to academic success: (1) relationship building, (2) life-skills development, (3) engaging lessons, (4) teaching relevant lessons, (5) setting high expectations, (6) differentiated instruction, and (7) motivation. The participants were asked how these practices lead to student success.

Many of the participants responded that having close relationships with their teachers impacted their school performance. They shared about the relationships with their teachers as

being a reason for wanting to do well, not wanting to disappoint their teachers. In speaking about how relationships help lead to success, Claude stated,

If teachers develop close relationships, then they will be able to make impact on our lives. I learn more from teachers who I believe genuinely cares about me and is interested in knowing me. I think that having the teachers I had in high school took time with me and poured into me. I learned how to be a better man, especially since my dad wasn't there. They were my fathers. So, yeah, relationship is important because with that came other things like how to a better person.

Ralph further elaborated that fostering relationships helps teachers connect with students in meaningful ways. He stated that such relationships help teachers captivate students' attention and makes them want to learn in class.

Anyone can be a teacher, but to be a good one you must have a connection with your students. When teachers interact with students, it's easier to get their attention. We as Black males need that interaction with teachers. Most of us don't have that person to at home to look up to, so when we come to school, we look at our teachers as a role model and mentor. If teachers can engage with us, not just about the school stuff, then I think we can be successful. It's not all about the math and reading. It's about teaching us how to be men. (Ralph)

Another important practice that students highlighted as leading to success for African American males is the intentional practice of teachers to make lessons engaging. This engagement for students included any efforts of teachers to connect the students to the lesson. Students shared how their teachers used a variety of strategies to involve them. Those strategies included showing images, using music, incorporating current events, etc. Langston shared,

When we are engaged in the learning process, it increases our attention and focus, motivates us to practice higher-level critical thinking skills and promotes meaningful learning experiences. Teachers who make it all about students increase the opportunities for us to be more engaged.

The students also discussed that they experience success when their teachers set high expectations and believe that they can learn at high levels. Malcolm believed this to be one of the

most important practices that teachers could use when working with African American male students. He stated that,

Students thrive when they believe their teachers believe that they can learn. For me, I tried hard for my teachers because they kept telling me they expected more. They always checked on me and pushed me to go harder. So, I believe that when students have teachers who believe in them, they do better or they want to do better. Just knowing that somebody thinks you can do it helps you want to do more.

Making content relevant was also identified as an important practice that leads to the success of African American male students. The students discussed how their teachers often incorporated content that prepared them for life and connected to their experiences. Garrett stated,

I think relevant content and relationships are the most important of the skills needed for African American males to be successful. Success in every facet of life usually involves people and a process. The relevant content focuses in on the process. By relevant content, I mean real-world applications to the principles learned in class. Applications where it's completely okay to be wrong, and structures the student's learning around actually thinking and using their problem solving skills as opposed to memorization where students get an answer right or wrong. Relevant content prepares the student for life, not just the exam next week. It also shows the student that answers are not always in Black and White, if we already had the answers to everything then everyone who completed school would be a successful, productive citizen. To sum it up, relevant content would gear the student toward relying on their problem solving skills rather than their ability to memorize a study guide. Problem solving is a skill that will serve you until your life ends. Another important aspect of a students' growth is the relationships. An often misunderstood portion of school is that we are in competition rather than working together to achieve a common goal. At the end of the day, we all have to live in the world that we create, together. The teacher-student relationship is imperative because it allows the student to connect with other like-minded students who go the extra mile to learn the material, and it also gives the teacher an opportunity to educate and engage in a manner that the kids do not have in class. In addition, the interpersonal skills learned on this level are great. Life is extremely hard, when you try to do it alone.

As Benjamin summarized, when teachers incorporated the aforementioned practiced,

It takes away the fear of the unknown or you can say fear of failure. It replaces it with confidence not to try hard and to give your best. It helps us know that we have someone that believes in us and who will be there when we most need it.

The teacher participants also identified practices that they believe contribute to academic success of African American males. They identified the following practices: (1) relationship building, (2) relevant content, (3) setting high expectations, (4) academic engagement, and (5) differentiated instruction. The teacher participants were also asked how these practices lead to student success.

In responding to the question, the teachers gave general overarching responses that spoke to how teacher practices (in general) lead to the success of African American male students. Richard replied that because the “African American male statistically has more attention issues, engaging them in meaningful tasks motivates them to learn what is being taught.” He stated that it is necessary for teachers to educate the whole child, which focuses on the social, emotional, and academic needs of learners. Richard elaborated that educating the whole child “teaches them how to cope with home and life situations while not letting it affect their academic performance.”

The teachers, like the students, echoed the importance of fostering healthy relationships, especially relationships that are trusting and caring. They believe that their students do well when their teachers demonstrate empathy and want to know them and not just become depositors of information. One teacher, Booker T. stated:

When young Black males know that you’re genuinely concerned about their well-being and future, it opens up a whole new world for them. They don’t want to disappoint me. Not wanting to disappoint me manifests itself in two major ways: (1) they want to make good grades (because I’m always asking about their grades) and (2) they want a relatively good disciplinary record. I talk to young Black males about respecting their teachers (even if they don’t like a particular teacher). Those two things ultimately lead to success in the classroom and beyond.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the teachers’ beliefs about how their practices lead to success for African American males is through the words of Harry. Harry stated,

The goal of education is to help students become a good person and a more capable person. As educators, our main focus should be to nurture the whole person, not just the

mind. We should help students ask questions like: Who am I becoming? Have I become a better thinker? Can I make the world a better place? I believe it is interesting and more useful for parents to know how well their child is at thinking, doing, relating and accomplishing the things he or she is passionate about. Practices, such as life skill development, relationship building, etc. will lead to help Black males be successful in all aspects are put into place.

In reviewing the practices identified by students and teachers, there were very few discrepancies between those identified by students and those identified by teachers. Two practices that students shared that were not discussed by teachers as much were life-skills development and motivation. It must be noted that the teachers did mention preparing students for life; however, the teachers discussed it more when they talked about relevant instruction. Based on interview data, students viewed motivation as important to succeeding. They mentioned how teachers gave words of affirmation, tough words of chastise, encouraging words, etc.

Table 6

*Practices Identified by Participants*

Practices Identified by Participants	How Practices Lead to Success
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Relationship building</li> <li>2. Life-skills development</li> <li>3. Engaging lessons</li> <li>4. Teaching relevant instruction</li> <li>5. Setting high expectations</li> <li>6. Motivation</li> <li>7. Differentiated instruction</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased performance</li> <li>• Increased interest in school</li> <li>• Increased desire to want to learn and succeed.</li> <li>• Motivation to try and to give best</li> <li>• Captured attention and focus</li> <li>• More engaged/involved with the lesson</li> <li>• Belief in own abilities</li> <li>• Feel prepared for life, not just academics</li> </ul>

## Unexpected Findings

Although the research focused on teachers' practices that lead to the success of African American male students, other important findings emerged from the study. One of the findings that emerged from the text was that of the importance of the gender role of the African American male teacher. Five of seven teachers identified by students as having made significant impact in their lives were African American male teachers. What is more interesting is that the student participants spoke of these gentlemen as being like fathers to them. They discussed the tough love that they received from them, as well as the affirmations that were spoken to them on a daily basis. The students felt challenged to be better men.

A second finding that emerged from the text is the idea of invisibility. The students were asked if they felt that their teachers (in general) were responsive to the needs of African American male students. They were also asked about their feelings when teachers say that they don't see color. The students' responses varied, but they overwhelmingly responded that they often felt as if they were not noticed by all of their teachers. Langston stated that when teachers say they do not see color that

they don't acknowledge me. I feel like they seen it and they know it, but they didn't try to teach us. I feel like they were not responsive to the needs of Black males. They didn't really acknowledge us as being different. Because even though people say we're not different, at the same time it's different stuff about us. Like we would be treated different and stuff like that in real life.

A third finding that emerged from the data, from teachers' perspective, is that of creating a welcoming and warm environment for students. Perhaps students equated relationships and caring and loving to being welcoming and inviting. However, teachers from the study specifically talked about the importance of making students feel welcomed in their rooms and asking them each day about their day.

A fourth finding that emerged from the data is that of involvement in school activities. All of the student participants in the study were in extracurricular activities. Seven of the eight participants participated in athletics, and the remaining one was in band. Interestingly, five of the seven teachers identified by students were coaches, and one was the band director. Students discussed how these leaders pushed them to well on the field or court, as well as in life.

A final finding from the study was the absence of race as topic of conversation. While several of the teachers in the study indicated that they do not shy away from discussing race and its awful effect on humankind, quite a few teachers were reluctant to discuss race, even to point of denial of race as a problem. The teachers discussed the feeling of not knowing how to talk about it, how to remain professional in the conversation, or avoiding levels of discomfort for others. One teacher even mentioned that he/she treats everyone on an equal basis. One other talked about the importance of being fair to all students. Still one talked about being “grateful of where we are now” as a county and that “thank goodness we’re in a world today where there’s not slavery anymore. Where people are treat like human beings.”

Table 7

*Additional Findings*

Additional Findings	Examples/Evidence
1. Role of the African American male teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Father figures</li> <li>● Mentors/role models</li> <li>● Disciplinarian (tough love)</li> <li>● Encourager (words of affirmation)</li> </ul>
2. Feeling of invisibility of African American male student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers denial of seeing color</li> <li>● Teachers as non-responsive to needs of African American males</li> </ul>
3. Fostering a warm and welcoming environment for African American male students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Greeting students with smiles</li> <li>● Being inviting and friendly</li> <li>● Asking about their day</li> </ul>
4. Involvement of African American male students in school activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Seven athletes (multiple sports)</li> <li>● One band member</li> <li>● Involvement in clubs</li> </ul>
5. Race as topic of conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reluctance to discuss race</li> </ul>

### **Similarities and Differences in Students' and Teachers' Emerging Themes**

After studying the data analysis, evidence of similarities and differences of students and teachers' perceptions emerged. All of the participants, students and teachers, were asked questions that focused on what teacher practices they have found to be most effective when working with African American male students.

Six themes emerged from the students' data analysis, while five emerged from the teachers'. Both students and teachers data showed the following similarities in themes: (1) supportive learning environment, (2) culture of high expectations, (3) active learning environment, (4) equitable learning culture, and (5) relevant instruction.

Similarly, the data highlighted the remarkable differences in perceptions of students and teachers. While all of the teachers' themes were closely aligned to themes that were evident from the students' data, there was still another theme that was not evident from the teachers' data. The one theme that arose from the students' data that was not apparent in the teachers' data was preparation for life.

The data from the students and teachers' analysis highlight two themes that appear to be contrary, but I believe the two are very closely connected. Those two themes are connection of curriculum to lived experiences and culturally relevant instruction. The teachers discussed the importance of culturally relevant instruction but gave little evidence that their instruction was indeed culturally relevant. The students highlighted the importance of having a curriculum that was closely connected to their lived experiences, which is a component of the culturally relevant framework under the tenet of cultural competence. The two were highlighted in this section as being similar themes under relevant instruction.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented findings from interviews of African American male students (former high school students) and teachers to answer the three research questions for this study:

1. What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to their school achievement?
2. What are the teachers' practices that teachers say contribute to African American male school achievement?
3. How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and the teachers they identify as successful?

CHAPTER V:  
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION

This chapter includes the summary of the study, discussion of the findings, and conclusions and implications. Recommendations based on the analysis of the data are also provided.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to their school achievement?
2. What are the teachers' practices that teachers say contribute to African American male school achievement?
3. How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and the teachers they identify as successful?

**Discussion of Research Findings**

**Research Question 1**

*What are the teachers' practices that successful African American male students say contribute to their school achievement?* The results of the study revealed commonalities among former student participants concerning their beliefs about teachers' practices that influence school achievement for African American males. The majority of the participants felt that the

following practices of teachers have significant impact on African American male student achievement: (1) fostering an environment of high expectations, (2) preparing students for life, (3) establishing an environment for active learning, (4) fostering an equitable learning environment, and (5) connection of curriculum to students' lived experiences. Several of the teachers' practices identified by students as being successful are reflective of the practices of culturally relevant teachers. Culturally relevant teaching is situated on three criteria: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Academic achievement.** Ladson-Billings (1995) states that students must understand that there is a need for academic success. Two of the teachers' practices identified by the students primarily focus on pushing students to succeed academically. Those practices include: setting high expectations, and incorporating rigor in instruction. First, setting high expectations is important because teachers' educational expectations for their students can have a tremendous impact on their students' academic performance (Newton & Sandavol, 2015). Newton and Sandavol (2015) further posit that teachers' beliefs and expectations about their students can become self-fulfilling prophecies, as it relates to achievement. Second, the students believed that engaging in rigorous curriculum is important for African American male achievement. Most of the student participants were all enrolled on the advanced track in high school. In other words, they all took classes that were high in rigor and prepared them for college. It must be noted that rigor does not only take place in advanced classes; it can happen in any classroom. This rigor takes place when teachers teach at high levels and provide students with appropriate challenging tasks that cause them to think and perform at high levels. Research suggests that quality tasks allow students the freedom to work from their strengths and create presentations or products that express their unique personal signature (Eisner, 2002).

In 2008, the SREB revealed that a lot of evidence supports the notion that a demanding curriculum has intellectual and practical benefits for students of all backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. Bottoms, Hornig-Fox, and New (2001) found that students of all backgrounds tend to benefit academically from a more rigorous curriculum. Garmoran and Hannigan (2000) found that taking algebra in 8<sup>th</sup> grade seems to produce almost as much achievement gain for low-achieving students as for their high-achieving peers.

**Cultural competence.** The students also shared teachers' practices that correlated with cultural competence. Ladson-Billings (1995) believes that school should be a place where students maintain their cultural integrity and that teachers should use culture as tools for learning. From the students' perspectives, they mentioned how their teachers used culture as tools for their learning. For example, students discussed how their teachers often incorporated music, games, and current events into their lessons. One student, Malcolm, shared how his teacher would often use basketball or another sport as analogies to help them better understand the content.

The students also identified two teachers' practices that help to foster the idea of cultural competence. Those practices include: differentiation of instruction and engaging lessons. First, students suggested that African American male students, like many learners, thrive most when learning or instruction is differentiated--addressing their learning styles. When teachers find multiple ways of teaching students that is identifying and teaching to the different learning styles, research says that achievement, attitude, empathy, retention, and transfer are more obtainable (Caskey, Styron, & Nyman, 2008). As Watts-Taffe, Laster, Broach, Marinak, Connor, and Walker-Dalhouse (2012) stated, "Differentiated instruction allows all students to assess the

same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes tailored to students' learning needs" (p. 304).

Second, student engagement is necessary for student achievement (Reyes et al., 2012). Accordingly, students that are engaged are attentive in the classroom, they participate in discussions, they ask questions, they demonstrate that they are motivated and interested (Reyes et al., 2012). Strati, Schmidt, and Maier (2017) define engagement as being "comprised of simultaneous experiences of concentration and cognitive investment, as well as interest and enjoyment in a task" (p. 132). According to Strayhorn and Devita (2010), student engagement "involves students in meaningful activities and experiences, including in-class discussions, faculty-student collaborations, peer interactions, and deep active learning" (p. 88). Vatterott (2007) states that students connect personally with the content when they identify with people or feelings, they connect the content with something in their everyday life, they use the content to understand the world around them, or they wrestle with moral or ethical dilemmas.

The student participants felt that their teachers were able to make their lessons engaging by continuously working to make sure they were actively involved in the lessons. The students felt that the teachers made the lessons more engaging because they worked to make the lessons relatable to them. They felt involved connected to the lesson and teachers' creative ability to highly involve them in meaningful ways. Their teachers used images, technology, cooperative learning, and other strategies to help foster engagement.

**Critical consciousness.** The third proposition of culturally relevant pedagogy is critical consciousness. Critical consciousness occurs when teachers afford students the opportunity to engage in the world around them (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It affords students the opportunity to critique the world around them. This was a little more challenging to observe from the

interviews; however, the data does provide evidence where students felt that a few of their teachers' practices closely align with critical consciousness--relevant instruction and life-skills development. Student participants acknowledged that what made them learn best was the fact that their teachers made the content relevant to their lives and experiences. They felt connected to the content because it was engaging, as well as essential to success. In a research conducted by Cummins (1984), he found that the extent to which students' own interests are incorporated into the school program appears to be significantly related to their academic success. Intrator (2004) suggests that students are most likely to be emotionally engaged by tasks that allow them to give their opinion, solve a problem that is important to them, compete with others, imagine possibilities, or be creative.

## **Research Question 2**

*What are the teachers' practices that teachers say that contribute to African American male school achievement?* The results of the study revealed commonalities among teacher participants concerning their beliefs about teachers' practices that influence school achievement for African American males. The teacher participants felt that the following practices of teachers have significant impact on African American male student achievement: (1) supportive learning culture, (2) active learning environment, (3) high expectations, (4) equitable learning environment, and (5) culturally relevant instruction.

**Academic achievement.** Of the six practices identified by teachers, only one closely aligns with the cultural relevant criteria for academic achievement--high expectations and differentiation of instruction. When teachers set high expectations for their students and believe that those students can meet and/or exceed those expectations, then the students will excel at accomplishing this feat. This requires that teachers to avoid stereotypes that lead to deficit

thinking and to begin looking at their African American male students as being capable of achieving at high levels. This understanding was also reflected in the teachers' implementation multiple learning strategies and tools for student learning. Teachers in study shared using multiple methods that appealed to the students' preferred learning styles, such as music, games, extended time, instructional strategies, etc. By implementing these practices, these teachers were intentional in providing instructional strategies that are critical to supporting students' academic achievement.

**Cultural competence.** Two of the practices that emerged from the teachers' study as aligning to cultural competence are differentiation of instruction and engaging lessons. First, the teachers in the study acknowledged that not all people are the same; equally important is that not all learners are the same and neither do they all learn the same way. Parker (2002) stated that students learn by doing hands-on learning activities, not by being saturated with information. In their research, Caskey et al. (2008), suggested that teachers must vary their instruction and assessment to meet the many diverse needs of their learners. Second, the teachers all agreed that if students are to be successful in their classrooms then their lessons must be engaging. In a research conducted by Cummins (1984), he found that the extent to which students' own interests are incorporated into the school program appears to be significantly related to their academic success. Research also reveals that lower levels of engagement tend to correspond to lower levels of achievement (Bruce & Singh, 1996). Intrator (2004) suggests that students are most likely to be emotionally engaged by tasks that allow them to give their opinion, solve a problem that is important to them, compete with others, imagine possibilities, or be creative.

**Critical consciousness.** There was not a lot of critical consciousness on the part of teachers or, rather, it was not an area that teachers viewed as being integral to the success of

African American male students. There were instances when teachers discussed teaching students about African American history and culture or sharing current events with them. There were also instances where teachers shared the importance of making lessons culturally relevant; however, there was no evidence, from teachers' interviews, to indicate that teachers engaged students critically in understanding societal injustices or encouraged them to challenge those injustices. Again, there were one or two teachers, both history teachers, who did discuss some of their efforts to help develop critical consciousness for students; however, their efforts were limited by their fear of, perhaps, teaching blackness.

### **Research Question 3**

*How do these practices lead to student success, as explained by the students and teachers they identify as successful?* The first two research questions guiding this study focused on teachers' practices that contribute to school achievement for African American male students from the perspectives of students and teachers. It was apparent that participants, students and teachers, seem to regard education as vital to success in life. As a result, much of what was gleaned from the students' interviews was similar to that of teachers. The data from the interviews also reveal how students and teachers view these practices as leading to student success. The data analysis of teachers' and students' responses revealed that what teachers do makes a huge impact on the student learning and achievement. The students do have a role to play as learners, but as Garrett pointed out, "If there is no learning, then no teaching is taking place. Everything begins and ends with the teacher." When relationships are fostered and feeling of mutual trust has emerged and when teachers set high expectations for students' learning and believe that they make a difference in their students' lives, then students become optimistic about

school and want to succeed. One teacher participant mentioned that “it’s about reaching the heart before you can reach the head.”

### **Discussion**

The findings from this practical qualitative study were consistent with findings from relevant literature about African American male students and practices that led their success. Teachers’ practices that participants found to be effective in improving academic success for African American males were as follows: high expectations, rigorous instruction, engagement, differentiation, and relevant content.

Research from studies conducted by White (2009), Jenkins (2006), and Howard (2014) support the notion that when teachers set high expectations for their African American male students and their learning, then they succeed at high levels. Howard (2009) stated that “teachers’ expectations and perceptions of students impact academic achievement” (p. 9). Additionally, the researchers posited that African American male students must be involved in rigorous coursework that challenges them to think critically and analytically (White, 2009; The Policy Note, 2011). White argued that teachers and schools must make efforts to encourage African American male students to participate in more rigorous course work (2009). Sawiski (in The Policy Note, 2011) argued that African American male students need rigorous and challenging academics to form foundations to learning and to help increase literacy and computing skills.

Sawiski (2011) and Howard (2014), consistent with the findings from this research study, suggested that engagement is vital to students’ feelings of connectedness to the learning when engaged. Howard (2014) suggested the incorporation of social media and technology as a means of engagement, while Sawiski (2011, p. 8) suggested making school a “magical place”. This

study approached engagement from the same perspective but found that engagement also includes the level of involvement and connection the student has with the content.

White's (2009) research finding supported this study's findings that differentiation of learning is significant to African American male student success. Accordingly, all students are different and have multiple ways of learning. White (2009, p. 9) posited that "instruction that is varied, interdisciplinary, and differentiated to meet students' needs or learning style has a positive impact on student achievement."

Lastly, researchers (White, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Howard, 2014) argued that teachers must make their instruction relevant. This argument was consistent with the findings from this study in which student participants highlighted that they learn best when the instruction is connected to their lived experiences or is relevant to them. Jenkins (2006, 153) stated that "teachers should demonstrate the relevance of coursework to the students' adult years." He further suggested that students need to be taught why school is important. Howard (2014) concluded that students experience success when they are afforded space to dialogue and when teachers infuse students' culture into the learning experience.

### **Similarities and Differences in Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Practices**

Data from the interviews of both former students and teachers revealed that what teachers do has a tremendous impact on African American males' achievement in school. It was evident that students and teachers felt that building relationship with each other is integral to students' learning and performance. Students and teachers discussed the types of relationships they had with each other and how those relationships extended beyond the classroom. Even after they had graduated high school, the students still felt connected to the teachers who had formed a strong bond with them. Similar to relationship building, having an adult advocate is another practice

that emerged from the data as being important. Students need at least one person that who they can count on to provide an ear, to give them voice, and to empower them to make their dreams a reality. This adult advocate is the one person who students can count on in times of distress. In the absence of a formal mentoring program (which none of the participating schools have), having teachers as advocates also compels teachers to act as parents and mentors.

Other common practices that were extracted from the data analysis included: differentiation of instruction, engagement, high expectation, and relevant instruction. Students felt that their teachers, at times, catered their instruction to their preferred learning styles. Their teachers were keen about observing students' learning patterns and styles. In some cases, students discussed personalization of learning, learning through collaboration, learning by audio or visual, learning through movement. Whatever the case, students felt that their teachers made attempts to address their varying learning styles. Equally, the teachers seemed to support the students' claim about differentiation. Engaging students at times can be challenging, but the teachers worked hard to engage their students. The students expressed that their teachers worked to make their assignments fun and exciting; however, engagement goes beyond being fun and exciting. Even still, the teachers found creative ways to captivate their students' attention, while demanding excellence in performance.

From a closer examination of the data analysis from both the students and teachers' interviews, it was clear that three practices emerged from the students' data analysis that were not evident in the teachers'. Those practices were life-skills development, motivation to succeed, and academic rigor.

Through reflection, the teachers and students recognized several strategies and supports that help African American males accomplish achievement in school. It is evident from this

study that participating teachers are passionate about seeing their African American males' students achieve success at high levels. It was apparent that teachers truly make the difference in the lives of children and what they do has profound impact on student achievement or the lack thereof.

### **Practical Implications of the Study**

My findings from the analysis respond to the study's research questions and help to achieve its goals, which was to identify practices that teachers can employ when working with African American male students that lead to their success. Several implications on what teachers can do to help improve the academic success of their African American male students emerged from this study. The data from students and teachers yielded the following teacher practices as being successful when working with African American male students: (1) supportive learning culture, (2) active learning environment, (3) high expectations, (4) equitable learning environment, and (5) culturally relevant instruction.

The challenges facing African American male students in America's school deserve attention from school leaders and teachers. There are several implications about what school leaders and teachers can do to help improve school success for African American males. First, school leaders (teachers and principals) must make African American students feel valued by acknowledging them and their uniqueness. Of course, all students are different, but the students in the study felt that many of their teachers hide behind the phrase "I don't see color." As a result, the students felt ignored or as if they were not important enough to their teachers. A part of helping African American male students feel valued and of importance is by acknowledging the cruel past that marginalized people of color. Additionally, teachers can be careful to not be so dismissive about events and issues that are pertinent to the history and culture and of their

students. One teacher talked about his hesitancy in discussing Charlottesville; students also discussed how teachers would often not talk about Black issues from the news.

A second implication is for administrators to devise a plan (a recruitment plan) of how to get more African American male role models in their schools, preferably those leaders who are from various career fields, such as doctors, lawyers, judges, businessmen, etc. As previously mentioned, the students in the study all pointed to an African American male at some point in the interview as being a person of influence in their lives. It then appears vitally important that school administrators work hard to recruit admirable African American male teachers to their schools. The students need to be able to see an image of what a successful African American male looks like. Administrators should collaborate with community leaders to create opportunities to invite reputable African American men from the community to be a part of the school community by way of being mentors, reading buddies, hall monitors, etc.

The findings of the study are important data that could be beneficial for administrators who are interested in closing the ever-widening achievement gap that exist for African American male students. Because the data is qualitative, administrators are afforded the opportunity to understand, from students and teachers' perspectives, what is effective and, perhaps, what is not effective when working with this population of students. Moreover, administrators are able to use the findings of the study as a guide for providing professional development to teachers in the area of cultural relevant pedagogy and its impact on student achievement.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for further research have surfaced. Such research may provide additional insight into additional questions related to this study and

or its findings. The goal of the current study was to examine teaching practices that contribute to academic success of African American male students.

This study was a qualitative study that examined teachers' practices from the perspectives of former students and teachers. Perhaps tackling this study using quantitative research methodology may provide more insight about teachers' practices and student achievement. Another implication for further research is to study African American student achievement in America's schools. The achievement gap for African American students and their White counterpart is enormous, and perhaps research has been done on said topic; however, examining how schools use a multiple learning strategies as a means to improve student achievement for African American students may give more clarity to what schools and teachers can do. A third implication for further research may be on how prevention strategies in early grades can lead to school success for African American male students. A fourth implication for further research is a counter research to the one provided. This research aimed to look at practices that teachers can use to improve the African American male student achievement; however, a study on what practices teachers should avoid may also be advantageous in closing the achievement gap for African American male students.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is its limited sample pool. Seven of the student participants were athletes, and one was a band member. Perhaps a replication of the study, excluding athletes, may provide more insight. Another limitation is that all the participants come from four different schools, all of which are located in rural communities in central Alabama. This was done primarily for convenience; however, a future study might include more schools and more regions. By collecting data from more students and teachers in additional regions, I

could have seen whether teachers' practices vary across regions. Last, the data collection tools were limited to one in-depth interview for each participant. This was due to time constraints. Ideally, I would have liked to incorporate more interviews and at least two classroom observations. By incorporating these additional data collection tools, I would have been able to get a richer description of how the teachers' practices impacted their student achievement, as well as how their practices impeded student achievement. In other words, I would have been able to compare what the students and teachers said in their interviews with what actually happened in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, one of the primary functions of schools is to provide every student with a high-quality education. Every student wants to feel successful, as well as receive a quality education that allows him/her to compete with everyone else. Time and time again, our schools have continued to fail our African American male students. We often acknowledge that our philosophies of education hinges on the notion that we believe all students can learn, but not all students are learning--especially not our African American males.

This study has attempted to give teachers a glimmer of hope by examining teaching practices that have found to be effective in contributing to academic success for African American male students. The findings of this study suggest that African American students can learn at high levels, especially when teachers' practices reflect fostering trusting relationships, engaging learners through relevant instruction, establishing high expectations, incorporating academic rigor, differentiating instruction, and being a caring adult. It must be noted that these teachers' practices are not stand-alone practices. They all must be incorporated by the teacher in order to see the achievement we desire from our African American male students.

It is the practices of teachers that make the greatest impact on student achievement. If our African American male students are to experience the level of academic success that they are capable of achieving, then teachers have to believe that they make the difference.

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APPENDIX A:  
IRB APPROVAL

September 11, 2017

Montaurius Abner  
College of Education  
Box 870302

Re: IRB#: 17-OR-204 "Improving the Academic Success of African American Males"

Dear Mr. Abner:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on June 20, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpanito T. Noyes, MSW, PhD, CH  
Director & Research Compliance Officer

APPENDIX B:  
FORMER STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' SCRIPTS

## Script to Former Students

I am conducting research as a graduate student at The University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL). This research seeks to address the problem of African American male underachievement by identifying successful teaching practices and identify strategies that educators may consider as they work with African American male students. The specific work will contribute to the overall knowledge base about successful instructional practices in the K-12 public school teachers can use to help their African American male students experience academic success.

Your former high school has been selected to participate in this study. Representatives from your school were task with identifying successful African American males (former students), as identified by their completion of high school and enrollment in college, enlistment in military, or employment in career field where they received career technical credentials. As a result, you were selected to participate in this study.

Participation will only take about 60 – 90 minutes of your time. Participation is on a voluntary basis. I will email you and hand you a consent form with contact information in case you have any questions. If you agree to participate, we will arrange a date and time for the interview. The interviews will be recorded; however, to protect anonymity, pseudonyms will be used. All recordings will be transcribed and audio recordings will be destroyed. Thank you, most sincerely, for your help.

## Script to Teachers

I am conducting research as a graduate student at The University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL). This research seeks to address the problem of African American male underachievement by identifying successful teaching practices and identify strategies that educators may consider as they work with African American male students. The specific work will contribute to the overall knowledge base about successful instructional practices in the K-12 public school teachers can use to help their African American male students experience academic success.

Your high school has been selected to participate in this study. Representatives from your school were task with identifying successful African American males (former students), as identified by their completion of high school and enrollment in college, enlistment in military, or employment in career field where they received career technical credentials. The selected student participants were asked to identify teachers they felt were successful in helping African American males achieve academic success. As a result, you were selected as one of those teachers.

Participation will only take about 60 – 90 minutes of your time. Participation is on a voluntary basis. I will email you and hand you a consent form with contact information in case you have any questions. If you agree to participate, we will arrange a date and time for the interview. The interviews will be recorded; however, to protect anonymity, pseudonyms will be used. All recordings will be transcribed and audio recordings will be destroyed. Thank you, most sincerely, for your help.

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol

From the teachers' perspective:

1. What is your most successful teaching experience with African American Males? Have you done that with other students?
2. Share with me about your proudest moment as a teacher where you connected successfully with your African American male students.
3. Share with me your typical day of teaching (just one class). Walk me through the beginning of the lesson and the end?
4. How did race or racism ever come up as a topic of conversation?
5. What are successful strategies in helping African American males achieve in high school?
6. In what ways do you build relationship with your African American male students?
7. What goals and plans have you set to help your Black male students be successful?
8. What does success look like for you for your African American males?
9. What courses do many of your African American males take in high school?
10. In what ways do you or your school communicate with other shareholders about your Black male students (i.e. feeder schools, parents, community leaders, etc.)?
11. What do you know about your Black male students (i.e. learning styles, goals and aspirations, needs and interests, etc.) and how do you gather such knowledge?
12. How important is mentoring at your school? What does mentorship at your school look like for your Black male students?
13. In what ways is your curriculum "culturally relevant" to the lives of your Black male students?
14. Share with me about how you prepare your lessons. What considerations do you give for multiple learning styles, culture, and learning needs? How do you assess for learning and determine next steps for instruction?
15. What have you found to be the greatest challenges with working with African American male students? Share with me about how you address those challenges?

16. What practices have you found, during your teaching, to be impediments in helping your African American male students be successful?
17. Share with me your efforts, as a teacher, to provide an equitable education for your African American male students. What does equity look like in your classroom?
18. Share with me your beliefs about teaching and learning and its impact on student achievement?
19. How do the practices you identified lead to student success?

From the students' perspective:

1. Share with me about your high school experience.
2. Share with about a teacher (high school) that really connected with you – pushed you to do and be your best? Talk about his/her classroom. What was it like? What was a typical lesson like in his/her room?
3. What successful strategies did your teachers employ to help you be successful in high school and life?
4. In what ways did your teachers communicate their hopes and plans for your future?
5. What does success look like for you? Who defines it for you?
6. What courses did you take in high school?
7. How did race or racism ever come up as a topic of conversation?
8. Have you ever heard anyone say, “I don’t see skin color?” How do you feel when you hear this? Do you feel like your teachers saw you? Were they responsive to the needs of African American males?
9. In what ways did your teachers engage in your life beyond the classroom?
10. What did your teachers know about you (i.e. learning styles, goals and aspirations, needs and interests, etc.)?
11. What type of mentorship programs did your school have? Do you have a mentor? If so, how does having a mentor help you to be successful?
12. How did your teacher connect his/her curriculum to your lived experiences?
13. Of the teacher practices you shared, how do they lead to student success?

APPENDIX D:

LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENT REQUESTING THE DISTRICT  
TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY

## Indian Valley Elementary School

1099 Oldfield Road - Sylacauga, AL 35150  
Phone: (256) 249-0397 Fax: (256) 208-8943  
*"Learning Today; Leading Tomorrow"*

June 24, 2017

To the Superintendent of Education:

My name is Monte B. Abner, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The research I wish to conduct for my doctoral dissertation involves improving the academic success of African American males. The purpose of this study is to examine teaching practices that contribute to the academic success of African American males. This research seeks to address the problem of African American male underachievement by identifying successful teaching practices, as well as identifying strategies that educators may consider as they work with African American male students.

One or two high schools in your district have been selected to participate in this study. As a result, I am hereby seeking your approval to speak with the principal and/or guidance counselor, as well as interview selected teachers. You have my sincere assurance that these procedures will not be disruptive or in any way cause the district or school embarrassment. In fact, there will be no schools named or identified by location.

It will be made clear that participation is voluntary and that the most stringent protections of participant anonymity will be observed. The teacher participant will be asked read, sign, and keep for the records an informed consent form. There will be no publicized report by the school or district.

I have provided you with a copy of the consent forms to be used in the research process, as well as a copy of the approval letter which I received from the University of Alabama's IRB.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at [monte.abner@scsboe.org](mailto:monte.abner@scsboe.org) or 256.322.1526. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

  
Monte B. Abner

Enclosures: District Permission Form  
IRB Approval Letter  
Consent Forms  
List of schools and principals from your district

Principal Monte B. Abner



Asst. Principal Selena Felkins