

UNDERSTANDING THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL BOYS

By

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This study is dedicated to my daughters Imani and Nia.
I love you both to the moon and back.

This study is also dedicated to the three young men who
unselfishly shared their beliefs about their educational experiences.
May you no longer be invisible. Your voices are more powerful than you know.

“We are the hope of those boys who have so little, who’ve been told that they cannot have what they dream, that they cannot be what they imagine. Yes, they can!” Barack Obama

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This case study sought to determine the factors that three African-American boys who are in their fourth year of high school believed impacted their school successes and failures. There are various sources of literature on the school experiences of this population. What is lacking in the literature, however, are first-hand accounts of African-American male students who give voice to their beliefs about the factors that have influenced their school experiences. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework, this study provided an opportunity for African-American high school boys to contribute to the literature how their beliefs about their school experiences and factors have contributed to their school successes and failures.

Findings suggest that the boys' successes were impacted by family messages, school supports, and also by caring teachers who practiced pedagogy that the boys perceived as effective. The boys' school failures were impacted by teachers who practiced an ineffective pedagogy, as well as school structures, policies and procedures. Although the boys experienced many obstacles along their educational journey, they were determined to graduate from high school. The three young men in the study were very insightful, and their voices provide implications for improving the school successes of African-American boys.

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Education has been defined as the key to success, the factor that levels the playing field between the haves and the have-nots. If that statement is true, African-American males have a complicated future. An examination of the African-American male's school success produces dismal results. Howard (2008) found that 55% of African-American males who had started high school four years earlier did not graduate with their peers.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was implemented in 2002 in an effort to increase the achievement of all students. However, the achievement gap between African-American and white students persists. African-American males continue to slip through the educational cracks as if they are invisible. Books (2007) describes invisible children as those whose lives have received the wrong types of attention from the educational establishment or those whose lives and insights have not received the attention they deserve. African-American male students qualify on both counts. Their educational failure has become the norm in schools throughout America.

Over 50% of the African-American students in the nation were found to lack proficiency in core subject areas (Howard, 2008). In 2005, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that over 50% of African-American fourth-grade students lacked proficiency in reading as compared to only 24% of their white counterparts (Howard, 2010). The school failure that African-American males experience in these primary years follows them into their secondary years. More than 70% of African-American males in New York and Chicago failed to graduate with their cohort (Books, 2007).

The Schott Foundation for Public Practice (2012) attributes the low graduation rates and school failures to the "push-out" and "lockout" crises in our nation. The lockout crisis describes

the challenges that African-American boys must contend with in America's schools. Although they continue to attend school, they don't have access to necessary resources that include advanced placement opportunities, post-secondary attainment opportunities, student-centered learning, well-resourced community schools and early childhood education, (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). The lack of access to the critical resources negatively impacts the boys' achievement and perpetuates their school failures.

The push-out crisis refers to African-American boys who aren't attending school because of the disparity in discipline policies that include out-of-school suspensions (The Schott Foundation of Public Education, 2012). The discipline practices that African-American students are forced to contend with may contribute to their underachievement. Zero tolerance policies were implemented in schools in the early 1990's as a deterrent to drugs, weapons and violence. Today, the policies have been expanded to include less major offenses such as absenteeism, defiance and tardiness. The effects of the zero tolerance policies on African-American males have been devastating. Suspension has become the major form of discipline in schools across the nation for African-American boys. In Flint, Michigan several schools suspended over half of their African-American students in one year (Books, 2007). According to Gregory, Skiba and Noguera (2010), while 20% of white students have been suspended or expelled at least once, the percentage of African-American students is closer to 50%. While suspended, African-American students miss important instruction. The impact of extended school absences continues to accrue and contributes to students' lack of achievement. Howard (2008) reports that schools in which students lacked proficiency in writing, reading and math were also found to have a disproportionate amount of suspensions and expulsions.

The disparity in discipline practices may be explained by the cultural lens through which African-American male children are viewed. Ferguson (2000) contends that African-American males are viewed as criminal and as an endangered species. She also found that many white educators view African-American male children as being adult-like, with adult motives. In turn, educators are more punitive towards them than they are towards white students. In schools where corporal punishment is permitted, African-American students are five times more likely to be hit than their white counterparts (Ferguson, 2000). Additionally, the likelihood that an African-American male student was suspended had more to do with the attitude of the principal than with the student's behavior (Books, 2007).

Deficit-based thinking and low teacher expectations contribute to the disparity in discipline and academic achievement. Deficit-based thinking is grounded in the cultural deficit theory. This theory blames people of color for the racial disparities that exist in society (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). To this end, educators who subscribe to a deficit view of thinking believe that African-American students lack the cognitive abilities to learn. For many African-American students, the teacher's low expectations produce low outcomes. In fact, the school failure of African-American males has been linked to uncaring teachers who support a deficit-based ideology (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges & Jennings, 2010).

The cultural deficit model has roots in the eugenics movement. During the eugenics movement a biological campaign was launched in an effort to prove that African-Americans were inferior to whites (Howard, 2010). Race was the factor that was used to prove that the African-American ethnic group was inherently different. The inferiority doctrine was supported in law, science, folklore, and popular culture and was characterized by acts of physical violence (Ferguson, 2000).

The belief that non-white people were inferior was deeply ingrained in the fabric of American culture. Although this movement was established in the 18th century, its remnants are prevalent today and have a direct impact on the academic experiences of African-American males (Howard, 2010). Today, the conspiracy tactics are more disguised and less overt. In schools the eugenics beliefs are perpetuated by deficit-based thinking and low teacher expectations (Howard, 2010).

Harmful media images continue to contribute to the negative views that many have about African-American males. They are portrayed as over-sexed, slaves, pimps, athletes and entertainers (Howard, 2008). These images are ingrained in the minds of educators and contribute to their socialized beliefs about African-American males. In turn, the young men are forced to grow in an environment that views them as unintelligent, vicious and intimidating. Ferguson (2000) conducted interviews with African-American teachers and found that they attributed the high number of at-risk African-American males to a lack of cultural understanding of teachers who were intimidated by them. Teachers who lack a cultural appreciation of their students have difficulty constructing inclusive opportunities that encourage learning. The learning that takes place in the classroom is directly linked to the relationship that teachers have developed.

African-American males are more likely to be taught by teachers who don't understand the importance of building relationships with their students. The teachers lack cultural competence and doubt their abilities to teach minority students. They teach in schools that have not been structured to support the academic achievement of African-American males. The teaching practices in our educational establishments have been coined the "pedagogy of poverty" because they are dehumanizing and discriminating (Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park & Mitchell,

2006). Such dehumanizing teaching practices negatively impact the educational experiences of this population and continue to perpetuate their failure.

Because they are misunderstood, African-American males have a different schooling experience than most of their peers. They must contend with educators who don't believe in their ability to learn or their ability to have academic success. Because African-American males are affected by their teacher's opinion of them, they are less committed to school. As early as first grade, students are mindful of the inconsistencies in teacher interactions with different types of students (Ferguson, 2000). The teaching inconsistencies may explain why many African-American males develop the "fourth grade failure syndrome" and become disinterested in school (Books, 2007).

African-American male students who remain interested in school have teachers who value their culture. The teachers seek to understand the student's culture and adapt their teaching practices to support the student. Culturally relevant teachers create an inclusive classroom environment that encourages learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that culturally relevant teachers encourage their students to accept their cultural identity and challenge inequities that are prevalent in schools. Unfortunately this has not been the norm. Teacher relationships with African-American males have not been nurtured and in turn the students' academic experiences have been less than positive.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to expand the body of research on the African-American male educational experience. This study utilized the voices of African-American males who were struggling academically, to document their stories and explore their understandings of their school successes and failures. In addition, this study provided a safe platform for African-American males to discuss their beliefs about how race has impacted their academic experiences.

The boys' experiences and insights will be used to inform educators about a strength-based approach to teaching that may encourage African-American boys to develop a healthy and positive academic identity.

Research Question

This study sought to answer the following question:

1. What factors do African-American high school boys believe explain their school successes and failures?

Significance of the Study

Researchers have emphasized the importance of including the voices of African-American males in conversations about improving their school success (Ferguson, 2000; Howard, 2003, 2008). Their voices may hold additional clues about a strength-based approach to teaching that encourages the development of a positive academic identity. This study seeks to fill a void that has traditionally been excluded from research by providing a platform for African-American males to discuss their beliefs about factors that have impacted their education. Giving voice to this group who has historically been marginalized may also allow them the opportunity to become the authors of their own lives and shed their invisibility.

The voice of the African-American male is essential and should be included in conversations on improving their school success. The literature is missing the firsthand accounts of African-American males who explain the impact that they believe race and racism has had on their educational experiences (Howard, 2008). This study provided a safe space for African-American males to openly discuss their perceptions of their school experiences. Their stories may counter the widely accepted deficit-based beliefs that have been used to explain their school failure. The researcher has faith in this population to realistically describe and interpret their educational experiences.

Estimates suggest that one in three African-American pre-school students are likely to go to prison before reaching the age of 30 (Books, 2007). Estimates suggest that three African-American males will enter prison for every one African-American male who enters college (Howard, 2008). Although African-American males account for six percent of the population, they represent 45% of the prison population (Ferguson, 2000). Sadly, homicide is the leading cause of death for African-American men between the ages of 18 and 24 (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006).

This study is also significant in my local context. My school district was identified as having the lowest graduation rate of African-American students in the nation. Although, African-American males account for only 19% of the students in my district, their school failure rate is higher than the national average. Sharockman (2011) reported that in 2008, Pinellas County graduated only 21% of its African-American male students. These numbers are worse than the graduation rates for African-American males in larger urban districts that include Hillsborough, Dade and Broward counties. This research project is vital because it may possibly be used to inform educators in a way that positively impacts their work and thereby increases the school success of African-American male students.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This research project is designed to explore how three African-American high school boys view their school successes and failures. The purpose of the research is to examine each student's perceptions of the factors that have impacted their educational experiences. In an effort to situate the study in the growing professional literature about African-American boys in school, several kinds of professional literature were reviewed. This chapter will begin with an overview of critical race theory (CRT), the theoretical framework that was used to guide the study.

The chapter will also examine academic identification of African-American male students. The relationship between identification with academics, student participation and the student's approach to school will be explored. In addition, the relationship between racial identity and academic identification will be examined. This examination reveals that a strong racial identity is a factor that increases student success. The investigation will also explore research that describes a strong racial identity as a barrier to the academic success of African-American male students. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an overview of the cultural wealth that African-American male students possess and the positive impact that cultural wealth will have on their academic achievement if it is recognized and nurtured.

Critical Race Theory

This study was guided by the critical race theory framework. CRT was an extension of the critical legal studies (CLS) movement which was created by people of color in the field of legal studies who were interested in analyzing how legal doctrine and discourse perpetuated the inequitable social structures that had been created in the U. S. (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In addition, CLS scholars were disillusioned with the results of the Civil Rights Movement that they felt led to more covert forms of discrimination (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has since

been adapted to analyze the impact that racism has on education. Thus, CRT provides a solid framework for examining the role that race and racism play on the schooling experiences of African-American males.

CRT supports the notion that racism is deeply ingrained in American society and challenges and critiques the notion of the liberal view of incremental progress. According to CRT, current progress is inadequate to support the paradigm shift required to end racism in this country (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ignoring the role of race and racism in education might suggest supporting a color-blind ideology that ignores the importance of racial differences, cultures and beliefs. It may also lead to the implementation of simplified strategies which are ineffective. From a CRT perspective, the role of race must be evaluated during conversations that involve issues of equity in America's schools (Howard, 2008).

Critical race theorists are also social constructivists who believe that knowledge is created once participants interpret the meaning of their experiences. To this end, counter-storytelling is employed as a method of evaluating the explanations of those who are in power. Through a first person account, the participants are able to interpret their lived experiences and the impact those experiences have on their lives (Howard, 2008). The oppressed group is liberated during the counter-storytelling experience because it allows them the opportunity to identify the reasons for their oppression. The participant's interpretations of the events challenge the American myth of meritocracy, the belief that people's accomplishments are based solely on their hard work or merit (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Similarly, according to the myth of meritocracy, failure is solely the result of the absence of hard work. CRT views race as central to an explanation of the school failure of African-American males and therefore challenges conventional explanations of student failure.

Academic Identification

Identification with academics is defined as the degree to which academic attainment forms the foundation for a person's global self-assessment (Osborne, 1997). More specifically, academic identification impacts student beliefs about their overall well-being based on how well they perform academically. Academic identification has been described as a precursor for students to achieve academic success (Osborne, 1997). Students who do not identify with academics should have less academic success because they are less motivated to succeed. In addition, students who don't identify with academics are more susceptible to the barriers that tend to impede academic progress.

Osborne (1997) conducted a study of the academic disidentification of minority students. One goal of the study was to explore whether or not African-American boys remained disidentified throughout their high school career. Another goal was to determine if African-American girls also disidentified. The third goal of the study was to identify whether other disadvantaged groups disidentified with school, and the final goal of the study was to examine whether disidentification occurred in all content areas.

The data revealed that African-American boys are more susceptible to academic disidentification than any of the other subgroups that were studied. The correlations between grades and self-esteem continued to significantly decrease for the African-American boys from the eighth to the twelfth grades (Osborne, 1997). Although African-American boys disidentified across all content areas, reading was the content area with which they disidentified most strongly. These findings are significant and suggest that African-American boys struggle throughout their educational careers.

African-American males are also intently aware that their race shapes the perception that educators have of them and this awareness impacts the development of their academic identities

(Howard, 2008). The deficit-based beliefs that educators have about this population impact their instruction. Teachers rate African-American males lower than their non-African-American counterparts on social behavior scales and in their academic expectations (Books, 2007). The African-American males' schooling experiences have led them to believe that they are least liked by their educators. Ironically, they are the population that will most likely value the beliefs of their teachers in their ability to succeed. Research has found that even when African-American males possess the ability to do well in school, their teachers' perceptions are not changed (Lynn et al., 2010). African-American male students are mindful of the classroom inconsistencies and their academic identities are negatively impacted as a result.

There are however, educators who have a positive impact on the African-American male's academic identity. These educators are able to build upon students' strengths and encourage educational success. Howard (2010) identified several schools that have shown success in closing the achievement gap. The researcher studied the schools over a three year period and found that teachers had an explicit acknowledgement of their students' race and that they were expected to become culturally competent teachers. Culturally competent teachers recognize the importance of building relationships with their students. They value their students' culture and make an effort to understand it. Because the culturally competent teachers recognize their strengths and build upon them, academic identity and achievement are increased.

Cushman (2003) interviewed eighth and ninth grade students at a predominately African American charter school to create a job description for teachers who wish to improve their practice. She utilized the voices of students who described their beliefs about the factors that had impacted their learning. The students spoke candidly about a variety of topics that included classroom management, classroom culture and teacher expectations. In addition, the students

described who they were and their beliefs about the factors that impacted their academic successes.

During the interviews, the students revealed how important it was that their teachers recognized their strengths (Cushman, 2003). Although the recognition of their strengths impacts their academic successes, the students believed that there were few opportunities to make their strengths known. The students also disclosed that their academic successes were impacted by teachers who they believed communicated that they cared for them. The students were aware when their teachers didn't like them and this awareness affected their learning (Cushman, 2003).

Racial Ethnic Identity and Academics

Do the racial identities of African-American male students impact their school successes and failures? And, if so what is the impact? Fordham and Ogbu (1986) support the notion that African-American students do poorly in school because they realize that their academic effort will have little to no impact on their economic opportunities. Over time, African-American students are hesitant to succeed in school because school success will not ensure access to jobs and opportunities that their white counterparts enjoy. To avoid these barriers and create coping strategies, the African-American student becomes disillusioned with school and begins to define school success as "acting white" (Ogbu & Fordham, 1986). To the African-American male, "acting white" is viewed as shedding the African-American identity and taking on the traits of the oppressor.

As a result of this dissonance, African-American students who are able to succeed academically choose not to. These students ascribe to a school culture that defines academic success as "joining with the enemy." To successfully maneuver through the education system, African-American students must implement several survival techniques. The survival techniques include hiding their abilities from other students, participating in sports, becoming the class

clown and deciding not to perform academically. These survival strategies create a culture of academic ambivalence and the African-American student continues to struggle academically.

What this theory fails to explain are the reasons why some African-American youth who identify with their race are successful in school. O'Connor (1997) attempted to explain this phenomenon by exploring the collective struggle and resilience of inner city students. The study attempted to answer the following key questions: "Are future and academic orientations affected by the meanings individuals construct about the efficacy of human struggle?" "If so, what facilitates the individual's ability to imagine that humans can struggle efficaciously, and by what process do these imaginations positively affect perceptions of personal life chances, academic performance and achievement behavior?"

O'Connor (1997) found six African-American students whose academic motivation increased due to their awareness of the impact that race and culture has on social mobility. These findings were in sharp contrast to the research that documents the resistance to schooling of working class and minority students. Ogbu (1994) reports that the limited opportunities and social constraints that are placed on the African-American community make African-American students less likely to work hard in school. That is, African-American students resist the promises of the American Dream and resist academic success because they know that hard work does not always result in success.

When she studied the impact that racism and discrimination had on the academic achievement of African-American students, Sanders (1997) refuted Ogbu's claim. The purpose of the study was to identify the achievement ethos among African-American students and to determine its impact on the students' academic achievement. The evidence of an achievement ethos would suggest that students respond differently to racism. The achievement ethos is

thought to encourage African-American students to strive for academic success despite racial biases and discrimination (Sanders, 1997).

Data for the study were collected from 40 African-American youth from a suburban U.S. school district who were interviewed about their perceptions of racism and racial discrimination. As a result of these interviews, three types of racial awareness were identified. The first category was the minimalization or denial category. Students in the minimalization category tended to avoid the issue of racism and held a “pull one’s self up by one’s bootstraps” mentality (Sanders, 1997). They felt that the economic state of African-Americans was caused more by a lack of effort and less by racism and discrimination.

The second category of students held a moderate to low awareness of racism. Although these students were more aware of racism than the students in the minimalization group, they were not able to identify acts of racism that personally impacted them or their families. The students in the moderate to low awareness category saw racism as an imagined factor that may or may not reveal itself in their lives (Sanders, 1997). In contrast, the high-awareness students were able to identify how racism had impacted their families. To this end, they used their academic success to disprove the stereotypes that accompany racism and discrimination. The students in the high-awareness category earned the highest grade point averages (GPA’s) out of the three groups.

The high-awareness students disclosed that they learned of racism by conversations or observations with their family members. The students also disclosed that their families discussed the coping mechanisms they themselves had utilized to overcome racial barriers. The discussions educated the students in the high-awareness category through positive racial socialization and encouraged these students to strive for academic success and break down the

barriers of racism and discrimination (Sanders, 1997). The findings in this study would suggest that African-American students have varied responses to racism and discrimination. One such response is to strive for academic success.

Fordham (1988) conducted a study on high-achieving African-American students to support Ogbu's claim. She found that successful African-American students disassociated themselves from their culture. In fact, the successful students developed an identity that was anti-African-American. Not only did successful students disaffiliate themselves from their community, they lacked the knowledge of the role that race plays in America.

In stark contrast, O'Connor (1997) found that successful African-American students who believed that racism was unavoidable in America were optimistic about their futures. The students were also keenly aware of the constraints that race placed on people in their communities. Despite their recognition of these struggles, the students possessed personal competence and a degree of critical consciousness that gave them hope and optimism for their futures.

Like O'Connor, Wright (2009) attempts to dispel the negative myths that exist about the impact that racial identification has on the educational achievement of African-American students. In her research, she highlights the qualities that African-American students bring with them into their classrooms. In addition, Wright (2009) explores how a strong Racial Ethnic Identity (REI) can positively impact the educational experiences of African-American students.

Wright's stance (2009) is in opposition to Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who assert that academic achievement is increased when students shed their cultural identities. Through an in-depth analysis, Wright (2009) concluded that minority students excel academically when their REI is connected to their academics.

Wright (2009) also highlights the strengths that African-American males possess that bolster their academic success. Such strengths can assist them with overcoming barriers they are confronted with inside and outside of the classroom. Educators must possess the intuition to recognize the strengths as attributes to be encouraged. When these strengths are nurtured and supported by their teachers, the school success of African-American males improves. Several of the strengths that are reviewed in the article include intrinsic motivation, the cool pose, verbal skills and interactional styles (Wright, 2009).

The verbal skills and interactional styles that African-American males use as coping mechanisms include rappin', woofin', and playin' the dozens. Rappin', woofin' and playing the dozens are many times mistaken for the real thing by those who are not familiar with the culture. The verbal strategies include strong language, boasting, and expressive and highly socialized behaviors. Engaging in these rituals with their peers provides practice and preparation for the real-life stressful situations that may include racism and discrimination. The practice from rappin', woofin' and playin' the dozens has taught the African-American male how to maintain a cool composure when under pressure.

Cool pose is another coping mechanism that African-Americans use to combat social inequality and racism. Historically, this has been linked to the African-American slaves who used the strategy to appear content and invisible to their slave masters. Today, the literature refers to cool pose as a strength that African-American males bring into the classroom but also as a hindrance to their academic achievement. When it is recognized as strength, cool pose symbolizes "social competence, dignity, pride, self-esteem and respect" and can be a promoter for academic success (Wright, 2009, p. 126). Cool pose behaviors may also be exhibited by

students who are resentful and suspicious of their educators. The behaviors may then be interpreted by educators as maladaptive because they lack cultural awareness of the population.

Roberts (2010) explored the notion of care and coined the term culturally relevant critical teacher care to describe the kind of care that African American teachers have for their students. The study sought to answer the following three research questions: “How do successful African-American secondary teachers define teacher care for their African-American students?” “What specific behavior/attitudes/critical incidents do successful African-American secondary teachers perceive as examples of care for African American students?” “What explanations do African-American teachers provide for their reported caring behavior?”

Eight secondary African-American teachers participated in the phenomenological study and data analysis revealed eleven themes. Although eleven themes were identified, the two themes that were most frequent were political clarity and concern for students’ futures (Roberts, 2010). During conversations on political clarity, the teachers described the barriers that the students would have to overcome as result of their race. The teachers also expressed the importance of education for African-American students and the high expectations that they had for them.

The teachers believed that they showed a concern for their students’ futures by coaching them on a variety of topics. The topics included the importance of maintaining a clean criminal record and avoiding trouble with the law to increase their employability skills. The teachers also encouraged their students to make an effort to defy the negative stereotypical images that are perpetuated in the media. The teachers in the study communicated to their students that they were aware of how race and racism impacted their education. To this end, the teachers helped them to develop coping mechanisms they would need to proceed.

Yosso (2005) described several coping mechanisms that African-American children bring from their homes and communities into the classroom as cultural wealth. This cultural wealth can be encouraged and built upon to increase their academic success. The cultural wealth is a combination of a student's aspirational, linguistic, familial, social and navigational capital. Aspirational capital is the hope that minority families continue to cling to despite the negative statistics. These families expect that their children will be successful in school and attend college despite the barriers they face. Aspirational capital encourages students to defy the odds and break the socio-economic barriers that have stifled their parents' social mobility.

Their aspirations are supported by the student's ability to utilize their social capital. Social capital is defined as the student's ability to utilize community resources that are available to reach professional and educational goals. The families' ability to aspire and utilize community resources leads to another form of cultural wealth known as navigational capital. Yosso (2005) defines navigational capital as the ability to practice resiliency and strive for success in educational institutions that have historically been intimidating and hostile towards people of color. Resilient families survive from their negative experiences and learn from those lessons. The lessons learned are then used as ammunition to overcome future barriers.

Linguistic capital, the ability to utilize multiple forms of communication, is yet another form of cultural wealth. Students who possess linguistic capital are also known to be great listeners who have honed the skill of storytelling and reciting stories and proverbs (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge that children of color bring into the classroom, values that have taught them a sense of community (Yossi, 2005). The familial responsibilities that children of color possess can also be identified within their familial capital. Familial ties

connect the immediate family reach to the extended family and community and encourage a commitment to the well-being of the community in general.

In conclusion, the school failure of the African-American male continues despite efforts at school reform. The trials that these students endure during transitions between the primary and secondary grades will also be examined. Kunjufu (1982) coined the term fourth grade failure syndrome after studying the reading scores of African-American males during the third and seventh grades. The data revealed that third grade begins a downward spiral of achievement that follows the African-American male into high school (Kunjufu, 1982). This study will also research the effects these experiences have on the development of their academic identity.

Unfortunately, factors continue to impact their academic identities throughout their educational careers (Osborne, 1997). This study will explore the factors that impact the academic identity of the African-American male student. One such factor is their identification with their race and culture. While Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that African-American males must shed their ethnic identities to succeed in school, other researchers (O'Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997; Wright, 2009; Yosso, 2005) suggest that the acknowledgement of their race and culture can positively impact their school success. This research will also add to the literature by creating a platform for African-American males to openly discuss their beliefs about these factors. Their voice is vital and must be included in conversations surrounding improving their academic success.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study was designed to explore the school experiences of African-American male high school students who are struggling academically. The research question is: (1) What factors do African-American high school boys believe explain their school successes and failures? The participants were in their fourth year of high school and were considered off-track for graduation because they hadn't passed the FCAT, their GPA was a 2.0 or less and they hadn't earned the number of required credits for graduation. The case study was conducted by utilizing individual and focus group interviews that investigated the students' understandings of their school successes and failures. The data were collected for approximately two months during the fall semester of the boys' fourth year of high school.

Case Study

The project was conducted as a case study. Case study investigators generally research real-life cases that are in progress in an effort to capture accurate information (Creswell, 2013). Case study researchers may opt to study a single case or they may study multiple cases. The information that is captured is presented to provide an in-depth understanding of the case or cases being studied. Collective case studies focus on one area of concern; however multiple cases are selected to illustrate the issue (Creswell, 2013). This study highlights the stories of three African-American high school boys and attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that have impacted their school successes and failures from their perspectives.

Sampling Methods

The particular high school where the participants were selected was chosen for the data collection because I had previously worked as a guidance counselor in the school for eight years, and I was familiar with the population and graduation rate of the school. The school houses

approximately 1400 students; 65% of the population are students of color. The school also has a magnet program that makes up about 30% of the school's population. Less than five percent of the students in the magnet program are students of color. Ninety-five percent of the students who are in the magnet program are considered on track for graduation, while only 30% of the traditional students are considered on track for graduation. My familiarity with the population of the students made this high school the ideal location to collect data.

The participants in the study were identified by homogeneous criterion sampling procedures. The selected participants were African-American high school boys who were at risk of not graduating. To be considered on track for graduation in the state where the research was conducted, fourth year students must have earned at least 18 credits and have a GPA of 2.0 or higher. In addition, students must successfully pass several state assessments. For the purposes of this study the students hadn't successfully completed the FCAT and were identified as having a GPA less than 2.0 and were lacking high school credits. The guidance department head at the designated high school selected 6 students who met the research criteria. The guidance counselor and the researcher met with the selected students and distributed the letter of introduction and consent form to the students (see Appendix A). Six students were chosen in anticipation that some students might not return the consent form. Three students returned their signed consent form and those students were selected to participate in the study.

The selected students were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. All participants and their legal guardians signed consent forms before data were collected. The consent forms informed the students and their legal guardians that participation in the study was voluntary and that their participation in the study could be withdrawn at any time without consequence.

Data Collection

Data were collected during three individual interviews with each of the three participants and one focus group which included all three boys. The individual and focus group interviews were audio recorded and the interviewer recorded field notes. The first interview focused on the elementary and middle school educational experiences of the students (see Appendix B). The second interview focused on the boys' high school experiences (see Appendix C). During the third interview, the boys reflected on the factors that have impacted their school experiences and experiences of other African-American males whose timely graduation from high school is in jeopardy (see Appendix D).

A focus group was conducted with the three participants after individual interviews were completed (see Appendix E). In the focus group, the boys were asked to describe their high school experiences and identify things that could have been improved at the school to increase their school success. The interview questions were semi-structured to support CRT's notion of the importance of the counter-storytelling of the participant. Semi-structured questions allowed the researcher to capture the perceptions of the students, but more importantly, this method created the platform for the participants to reflect upon and identify the reasons for their school failure. The individual and focus group interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour each and were completed during the months of October and November, during the fall semester of the participants' fourth year in high school.

In addition, I maintained and recorded my observations and insights throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The log enabled me to keep track of my decisions, questions and concerns as well as thoughts related to the boys' perspectives.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis was to identify themes or patterns in the boys' perspectives about their experiences as students. The audio-taped data were transcribed by a transcriptionist (see Appendix F). I conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis of the transcribed interviews as described by Clark and Creswell (2010). During the preliminary exploratory analysis, I reviewed the transcripts and the field notes to decide how to organize the data. Finally, I coded the data to identify patterns and descriptions as described by Creswell (2013). Although the coding process looks different for each researcher, it is the coding process that makes qualitative research rigorous (Clark & Creswell, 2010).

Creswell (2013) defines coding as describing, classifying and interpreting the data. During the coding process, I interpreted and described what the data revealed. Similar descriptions and interpretations were clustered and a label was assigned to each cluster (Creswell, 2013). Themes were then teased out of the clusters of codes as similar descriptions and interpretations emerged. The development of themes was a major component of this case study, because as the themes were developed, I engaged in a richer and deeper analysis of the data.

In the final step of the analysis, I made assertions and provided an interpretation of the data as they related to the literature reviewed in chapter two (Creswell, 2013).

During this phase of data analysis, I began to answer the research question by describing and interpreting the themes (Clark & Creswell, 2010). To interpret the data, I looked beyond the codes and themes to identify the meaning of the data. Excerpts from the interviews and focus groups will be presented in the findings section to support the assertions that were gleaned from the data.

Subjectivity Statement

This research has personal significance to me because I am passionate about increasing the school success of African-American males. I have worked as a guidance counselor in a high minority high school for eight years. During that time, I was confronted with the unique challenges and strengths of the African-American male high school student. It was during that time that I met the three African-American boys who participated in this study. Although, I was not their guidance counselor, the boys have a relationship with me because I am an educator at the school. As an African-American educator, I have a responsibility to create solutions that contribute to school success for these students. Without solutions, this crisis will continue to negatively impact our communities, state and nation.

During data collection I kept a researcher's log. A review of my log revealed that I recorded my reactions to the boys' responses that were different than I anticipated. An example of this is when I asked the boys about the factors had impacted their school successes. I had hoped that the boys would say that their guidance counselors had impacted them, but they did not mention guidance counselors. In addition, I had created a program for African-American boys at the school to increase their academic successes, and one of the participants in the study was a member of the program for two years. I had hoped that he would say that the program had impacted his school successes. It was disappointing to me that the boys never mentioned the impact of their guidance counselors. In this instance, neither of the boys responded as I had expected. By keeping a researcher's log, I sought to monitor my biases so that they had minimal effect on my interpretation of the data.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

This study was designed to answer the following research question: What factors do African-American high school boys believe explain their school successes and failures? During semi-structured interviews, the participants in the study revealed their views on their high school successes and failures and the factors that have impacted them. This chapter begins with a profile of each of the participants followed by an overview of the findings.

Mike

Mike is 18 years old and lives with his mom, dad and younger sister. Although he is not on a team, he loves sports and views himself as “really great” at baseball and football. One word that Mike uses to describe high school is “hard” because he has to buckle down and push himself through tough situations. He admits, however, that overcoming the obstacles has built his confidence because “you realize that you are doing it.” Mike would like the world to know that although he has had many “ups and downs” throughout his educational career, he still desires to become a high school graduate. He would also like teachers to realize that “no matter the age group you are teaching, you are going to have a big impact on the students’ lives.” I include an excerpt from my first interview with Mike which illustrates well his views of his school experience. I return to this excerpt later in the chapter when I describe the findings.

My fifth-grade teacher, I didn’t feel like she was making much of an effort to keep me at the school or help me with my work, so when I got kicked out I went to Park Street which is not a fundamental school and I think that just threw me all off. She wasn’t really trying. Teachers are supposed to have the best interest of the child at hand and I feel like she didn’t do that. You would think that she would come to me while I’m here at school or call home or something but she didn’t do that.

Donovan

Donovan is 17 years old and lives with his mom. He loves playing football but is unable to play on a team because of a medical condition. He enjoys listening to rap music and playing video games and spends most of his spare time with his cousins and friends. Donovan describes high school as challenging because it's "stressful just trying to pass." He thinks that school would be better for him if he wasn't required to pass the FCAT reading test to graduate from high school. Although school has been challenging for him, he would like the world to know that he plans to graduate from high school. I include an excerpt that was made by Donovan during the focus interview which illustrates well his views of his school experience. I return to this excerpt later in the chapter when I describe the findings.

I know some they only teach so they can coach. What's the point of that? They only teach so they can coach basketball or football. They don't really care, they just tell you to do it. They even told us that that's the reason they teach, so they could coach. They're just there to better themselves; they don't really care.

Charles

Charles is 17 years old and lives with his mother. He views himself as "really good" at basketball but doesn't have time to play because he is concentrating on graduating from high school. He describes his high school experience as "helpful" because he has learned things that he can use to better his life in the future. Charles would like the world to know that school could be made better for him if he is given the "right teachers who will help me keep my grades up." Charles is determined to graduate from high school and is working hard to "make good grades and focus" to ensure he is successful. I include an excerpt from Charles that was made during the focus interview which illustrates well his views of his school experience. I return to this excerpt later in the chapter when I describe the findings.

Like I said the class I did fail, my teacher, wasn't a good teacher, just all off subject and always talking about other stuff that had nothing to do with the work. If I was able to get

the teacher I wanted that would teach me right I would have been better off right now; I would have been on the right track.

Clearly, the boys have strong feelings about their experiences as students, and their insights have implications for educators. The research in this dissertation was designed to answer the following question:

- **RQ1:** What factors do African-American high school boys believe explain their school successes and failures?

The findings suggest that the boys' school successes were impacted by caring teachers who practiced an effective pedagogy, family messages and school supports. The findings also suggest that their school failures were impacted by teachers who practiced an ineffective pedagogy, as well as school structures, policies and procedures that did not serve them well. In fact, the boys spent more time talking about factors that they believed contributed to their school failures than they talked about factors that contributed to their successes. Because of this, I will begin by presenting the factors that the boys believed impacted their school failures: teachers who practiced what the boys perceived as an ineffective pedagogy and school structures, policies and procedures that seemed better designed to facilitate their failures than their successes.

“Not Really Teaching”

The boys described teacher behaviors that they believed indicated a lack of caring that practically guaranteed their school failures. Charles encapsulated this set of poor teaching practices as “not really teaching.” The non-caring behaviors were displayed in the teachers' inability to communicate the course content in a way that the boys could understand, their inability or unwillingness to build relationships with the boys, and a general lack of commitment to high quality teaching and learning.

Mike believed that several of his teachers lacked teaching skills. He explained, “They were not really bad teachers, it was just their teaching skills, they didn't really have much

teaching skills.” Donovan concluded, “They were teaching but not where I could fully understand.” Based on the boys’ accounts, their teachers lacked the ability to deliver the content to the boys in a manner that they could comprehend. That is, although the teachers were “teaching” the boys were not learning.

The non-caring behavior was also evidenced by teachers who did not build relationships with the boys and who acted as if they were not concerned with the boys’ well-being. Mike described the absence of relationship-building in a lengthy story about being expelled from a local fundamental school. Fundamental schools offer a back-to-basics approach with required parental involvement. Enrollment is limited, the schools are coveted and students and parents must adhere to program rules in order to remain in the program. Families who don’t comply with program rules are referred to the Intervention and Appeals Committee to determine if the student will be withdrawn from the program. Students who successfully complete an elementary fundamental school are guaranteed placement in a fundamental middle school as well. Students who are withdrawn from an elementary fundamental program lose their middle school fundamental seat. Mike shared how his fifth grade teacher displayed a non-caring attitude about him being removed from the fundamental program:

My fifth-grade teacher, I didn’t feel like she was making much of an effort to keep me at the school or help me with my work, so when I got kicked out I went to Park Street which is not a fundamental school and I think that just threw me all off. She wasn’t really trying. Teachers are supposed to have the best interest of the child at hand and I feel like she didn’t do that. You would think that she would come to me while I’m here at school or call home or something but she didn’t do that.

In other words, Mike perceived that his teacher failed to reach out to him during this period of crisis when he was removed from the fundamental school.

Charles described a similar experience with one of his high school math teachers who did not attempt to build a relationship with him. “My teacher, it seemed like he always had an

attitude towards me; any little thing I'd do I'd get in trouble, and get written up for, so I was basically never in class. I didn't do my work so my grade was always bad in there."

In addition to failing to build relationships with students, some teachers behaved in ways that led the boys to conclude that they were not committed to teaching and student success. During a discussion on high school English, Donovan shared his belief about a teacher who wasn't committed to the teaching profession. "She doesn't really care; she just assigns it to you and tells you to get it done. If you don't get it done it's on you. She doesn't care whether you know it or not." Charles described his experience with teachers he felt displayed a non-caring attitude:

So many teachers are not even willing to teach, they just give you work, like busy work. They are not really there to help you learn. I don't think they should be teachers because most of them just give you work and just expect you to get it done. Just because they have a degree they're not really teaching; I don't think they should be teachers because some of them just give you work and don't really teach you anything, they just expect you to get it done.

Charles' comments suggest that although his teachers were certified to teach, their certification alone did not ensure the use of an effective pedagogy. The boys claimed they would have benefitted from teachers who were committed to teaching them but more importantly who were committed to their learning. Donovan described his experience with un-caring teachers whose priorities were coaching sports:

I know some they only teach so they can coach. What's the point of that? They only teach so they can coach basketball or football. They don't really care, they just tell you to do it. They even told us that that's the reason they teach, so they could coach. They're just there to better themselves; they don't really care.

Charles described a similar situation in which the teacher displayed a lack of concern with teaching the math content:

In the math class I had last year it's like the teacher – we had always had an attitude. The work was kind of hard and he used to like to talk about other stuff

besides the work and that takes time out of the work we actually needed. My grade wasn't good in that class because I really wasn't getting it.

The findings would suggest that the boys were aware that some of their teachers were “not really teaching.” They described teachers who did not appear to care whether the students learned or not, failed to reach out and build relationships with students, and did not teach in a manner that enabled the boys to have access to the content. In short, the teachers who impacted the boys' school failures were not able to create environments that were conducive to learning.

“They Just Let Me Fall Through the Cracks”

The data revealed that all three boys believed their school failures were impacted by school structures, policies and procedures. They referred explicitly to some of these barriers to success and implicitly to others. Nevertheless, the school structures, policies and procedures hindered the boys' school successes. In all, the data revealed six such factors that will be explored further in this section.

The first policy that the boys pointed to was the fundamental school's policy of removing students for not meeting the requirements of the school. Mike attended a fundamental elementary school and was withdrawn from the program during fifth grade. Because Mike was removed from his elementary program, he did not attend a fundamental middle school. He reflected on the impact this had on his school failure:, “Well, I always think if I would have stayed at the school and got help, I would have gone to Rosa Parks Fundamental and my study habits would have been better than what they are now because after that I just stopped doing homework and stuff.” In other words, if Mike had continued along the fundamental path, his schooling experiences would likely have been dramatically different. In fundamental schools, school success is nurtured and expected. Daily homework is required; in addition, parents are required to sign off on all assignments. Students who complete fundamental elementary and

middle schools are generally prepared for a rigorous college-prep high school curriculum. Mike recognized that his removal from the fundamental school was a turning point in his educational history.

The second school policy that impacted the boys' school failure was their inability to choose their teachers. Charles attributes his failure to the school denying his request to be placed in another teacher's class. He commented: "Gee, that's why I'm in the situation, they really didn't help me. When I asked them to get a different teacher they still wouldn't give me the help I needed."

In fact, all of the boys wished they could have had the power to choose their teachers. Donovan lamented, "One class I have now, I wanted to switch the teacher just because I felt like I wouldn't do well in that class." Charles concluded, "If I complained about a teacher or something they should make sure there could be another teacher I could go to and have a chance of at least doing better in the next class." He continued.

Like I said the class I did fail, my teacher, wasn't a good teacher, just all off subject and always talking about other stuff that had nothing to do with the work. If I was able to get the teacher I wanted that would teach me right I would have been better off right now; I would have been on the right track.

In short, the boys agreed that their inability to influence the teachers to whom they were assigned posed a problem for them. Donovan's comment rings true for the three boys: "I think I'll be better and on the right track if I could choose all my teachers and make them a certain type of teacher." The boys expressed their desire to learn, and recognized that an effective teacher would be able to feed their desires. Unfortunately, their voices were silenced and they continued to be placed with teachers who contributed to their school failures.

The third factor that the data revealed was the boys' view that their middle school experiences did not prepare them for success in high school. Specifically, they referred to

middle school programs that did not hold them to high standards of performance. Donovan's story of success without effort was typical. He explained, "Middle school, I was able to play around a lot and still make that grade. I won't say that about ninth grade." Charles gave a similar account of his middle school experience: "I definitely started getting in trouble but I always found a way to keep my grades right in middle school."

Mike felt that he had been let down by his middle school: "Yeah, they moved me through, not really concerned with how I did, they just let me fall through the cracks." He went on to explain the impact that his middle school experience had on his lack of high school success: "I think that goes back to middle school, just being pushed through. I didn't have any study skills or study habits with me just being passed through with C's and D's. I didn't develop any study skills. I didn't do any homework; none whatsoever." Because of his experience, Mike suggested that middle schools create a grading system or policy that is more aligned with the high school requirements. The policy change would have given the boys experience with credit accumulation prior to going into high school:

I don't know if the credits should start there, but they should do some kind of credit thing. Maybe not make it mandatory for you to graduate but credits where you have to stay accountable with them, not like high school where you have to have so many credits to get out of middle school, but start counting credits then and make it seem more important. Then when we get to high school we'll have that same mentality and be more aware. If I had come into high school knowing what was required for me to graduate, I think I would have been a lot better off.

The boys recognized that they would have benefited from an early lesson on the requirements of graduating from high school. Providing this information to the boys might have prevented their high school failures because they would have been able to assess their progress much earlier.

The fourth policy that impacted the boys' school failure was the requirement that they pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). In general they expressed frustration

with the ever-changing test, their lack of preparation for it, and the inequity of placing so much weight on a single test. Mike expressed his desire to remove the testing barrier that had become a moving target for him when he said: “I would change the state test because they change it every year. How do you adapt to something that changes every year?” The students are given two opportunities each school year to retake the test. Although the school provided the opportunity, the boys had not been successful. Donovan expressed his frustration when he said: “You still got to pass it; you still got a certain score to pass and if you don’t pass it then you just don’t pass it.” Unfortunately, the boys’ previous attempts have been unsuccessful and the FCAT barrier remains.

The boys also questioned whether they had been adequately prepared to be successful on the test. Charles grappled with his lack of preparation for the test when he said: “We’re not fully ready when we go in there, we’re just going in with what we were taught which we don’t know if it’s on the test or not. We are going in with information and we don’t know if it’s the correct information.” The retake test is created to reflect the 10th grade standards in this state. Their lack of success on the test would suggest that there are holes in the boys’ learning and they lack the standards that should have been learned earlier in their high school careers. They expressed frustration with the realization that they might not graduate from high school even if they have earned the required number of credits and the required GPA. Donovan articulated his thoughts about the policy when he said, “I don’t like to think that you got to meet a certain score to pass or meet somebody else’s standards. Everybody learns at a different pace or on their own or in different types of ways. I don’t think it should be it’s either you meet this score or expectation or you don’t make it.” Charles concluded, “What’s the point of getting all good grades, and then you fail the test?” The boys agreed that the requirement of passing the FCAT and their

inadequate preparation for doing so was a huge source of frustration and a barrier to receiving a high school diploma.

The fifth factor that impacted the boys' school failure was the hidden curriculum of schools that perpetuates the failure of African-American boys. The lessons that the boys have learned from the hidden curriculum may not have been intended lessons, but the boys were keenly aware of the obstacles that hindered their school successes. Mike explained how his elementary school teacher used her influence to remove African-American male students from the elementary fundamental program that he attended when he said, "After we talked, I asked my mom about it and she reminded me that there was another African-American student who went there, he was in the same class and we both got kicked out. That teacher had a history of getting certain kinds of students kicked out of her class."

Mike clarified that the "certain kinds of students" were African-American children. The boys described how the hidden curriculum was evidenced in the behaviors of the school staff. Donovan commented, "I feel like they really don't care because we're known for having the least amount of graduates." Although Mike was aware of the obstacle, he expressed a desire to overcome it. "I think they are against most African-American students in school because they expect us not to graduate, so they're not going to put forth much effort to have us graduate. It's kind of difficult but it's doable." The boys perceived that their race dictated the type of support they received from school staff. Because the boys were perceived as failures, there was minimal effort on the school's part to prepare them for graduation.

The sixth policy that impacted the boys' school failure was the discipline policy that generally resulted in the boys being removed from the classroom setting. Charles reflected on how the policy impacted his learning when he said, "Any little thing I'd do, I'd get in trouble and

that stopped me from doing my work. I couldn't really get what I needed when I wasn't in class, I started to get behind and I just stopped worrying about it." He went on to explain how being suspended from school impacted his school failure: "I was suspended from school for five days. I missed out on a lot of my work and it was like hard getting my work when I was suspended so when I came back I was behind and my grades dropped." Because the boys were removed from the classroom setting, they missed instruction and the lack of learning contributed to their school failures.

The factors that impacted the boys' school failures began in elementary school and continued throughout their high school careers. As a result, the boys were at risk of not graduating from high school with their cohort. The data revealed two factors that contributed to the boys' school failures: ineffective teaching pedagogy and unsupportive educational structures, policies and procedures. One might argue that the factors that impacted their school failures played a major role in their lack of preparation for high school graduation. Nevertheless, the boys did identify factors that contributed to their school successes and their insights provide direction for school personnel.

School Successes

Although the boys' school failures led to their lack of preparation for graduation, the boys did identify school successes. The school successes appear to be the driving force behind their determination to graduate from high school. The data revealed that the boys' believed their school successes were impacted by teachers who practiced an effective pedagogy, school supports and family influences.

"More Like a Mother Figure"

The data revealed that the boys' school successes were influenced by teachers who practiced an effective pedagogy. In all, there were three behaviors that the teachers displayed

that impacted the boys' school successes: the teachers' ability to ensure that the boys were learning, the teachers' desire to build caring relationships with the boys, and the teachers' high expectations. Mike shared why he believed his second-grade teacher's pedagogy impacted his school successes. He explained, "I had one teacher in the second grade, she helped me. She was a black teacher so she helped all of the students, not just one race. She was I'd say more like a mother figure, more nurturing than any of the other teachers. I felt more comfortable asking her for help."

The first factor was evidenced in the teacher's use of checks for understanding during their instruction. Donovan benefitted from having an opportunity to communicate his progress towards the learning goal. He explained, "After just teaching us, she would give us mini quizzes and give us directions to go over it and tell her where we were messing up or going wrong." In other words, the boys learned best when they were allowed to communicate their level of learning to the teacher who adapted the lesson to ensure that learning was taking place.

The second factor that the boys perceived as good teaching was the teachers' ability to build caring relationships with the boys. Charles described his third-grade teacher's caring attitude when he said, "My third-grade teacher, you'd never see her mad or sad or anything. She helped us out a lot with certain things, and she helped me keep my grades up." All of the boys believed that their academic achievement was strengthened by teachers who desired to build positive relationships with them. Charles explained how his desire to succeed was impacted when he said, "She was like another one of my teachers that seemed to care a lot about you, so it made me want to stay focused and want to do well in that class and keep my grades up and stuff like that." Mike concluded, "Knowing that other people want me to do better makes me see that I need to do better for myself." Their observation of the teachers' nurturing behavior had a

major impact on the boys' success. In fact, all three boys believed that they excelled when their teachers nurtured them and communicated that they cared for them.

The third indicator of effective pedagogy was the teachers' high expectations for adherence to rules. The boys believed that they learned best when their teachers demanded excellence in the classroom. Mike explained how his teachers would communicate their desire for him to improve his behavior when he said, "Some of my elementary school teachers, they would put me in check when I know I needed to be doing something. They were kind of like an aunt in a way, yeah, a family member. You know when a family member tells you something, it's for your best."

Donovan had similar success with an elementary teacher who had high expectations. He explained, "My third grade teacher, she was stricter. She was fun and strict at the same time. She didn't just teach us, she also made sure that we actually knew it and helped us go over it individually. We had time to play and stuff but when it was time to get serious and do our work, she'd tell us." The boys appreciated teachers who established high expectations and held the students to meeting them.

When asked about their school successes, all three boys believed they had been their most successful in elementary school. Although Mike didn't realize it then, after reflecting, he concluded that his most successful educational experience had been in elementary school. He explained this realization when he said, "I don't think I felt successful in elementary school; I was just doing the work. I didn't think anything of it, but as I look back at it, I know I was doing well. At the time I wasn't really thinking about success or failure, I was just going through it." Donovan reflected on the success he had in elementary school when he said, "In elementary I used to like to read and do crossword puzzles. I made good grades then. I didn't just do enough

to pass; I was doing well.” Charles concluded, “In elementary school, I was doing well with my school work.” The data suggest that the boys’ elementary school successes were positively impacted by their teachers who practiced what they perceived as an effective pedagogy.

“Help With Any Particular Subject”

In addition to effective pedagogy, the data suggests that the boys believed that particular school supports impacted their school successes. Each of the boys was placed in a credit recovery program at the start of their senior year. In the program, the boys were allowed to retake courses that they had previously failed. When the boys pass a course that they previously failed, their GPA is raised and the credit is earned, placing them one step closer to their graduation goal. In the program, the boys received academic assistance and mentoring. Although the program impacted the boys’ school successes, the data suggest that it was the teachers in the credit recovery program who created the culture of success. That is, the program may not have been as successful without the caring teachers.

Each of the boys received academic remediation and assistance in the program. The assistance impacted the boys’ successes. Mike described the academic assistance he received when he said, “She’s really helpful when you ask her for individual help with any particular subject – she tries really hard to help you.”

Donovan expressed a similar sentiment when he said:

When I need help with homework or anything I can go to her to help me in that class. She helps me prepare for any upcoming assignments I get. Every week she checks our portal to see what we’re missing to help us like make it up or check to see if it’s any way to get extra credit.

Charles explained how the teachers in the course assisted him with other subject areas when he said, “You’re not just getting help for that class. They help you understand like other classes, too, like Algebra. They help with Algebra II and stuff like that, so it gives me a better

understanding in my other classes.” Although the boys were placed in the credit recovery program for a specific course, they were given additional academic instruction in their other courses as well. This additional instruction had a positive impact on the boys’ school successes.

The teachers in the credit recovery course offer more than academic assistance. Charles was grateful for the assistance that the teachers in the course had given him during the school year. He explained, “I can go to either one of them for help and advice. If I’m having a hard time with a teacher or in the class I can go and talk to them about it. They understand me and give me advice on what I should do. They keep me out of trouble.” The boys believed that the teachers in the credit recovery program provided various kinds of coaching that impacted their school successes.

“Education is Everything”

The strength of the family influence was another factor that impacted the boys’ school successes. The influences came from both immediate and extended family members. In fact, each of the boys believed that their families’ influences encouraged them to graduate from high school. One form of encouragement came from family members who experienced school successes and served as role models for the boys. Donovan explained the impact that his grandfather’s school success had on him when he said, “My granddad graduated, went to college and got a master’s degree. He gave me motivation to keep going and understand that school and education are the keys to everything, the key to success. I don’t like when I disappoint him; he just gave me motivation to keep going.”

Charles’ older brother was also successful in school. Charles described how his brother’s success encouraged him when he said:

My brother was raised in the same neighborhood as me around the same stuff but he showed me, you can’t let that stuff get in your way; you still can do what you

need to do and graduate and do well. My brother, he always did well in school, so that makes me want to be like him; follow in his footsteps and do well.

The boys benefitted from having family members who had school successes because their successes became models for the boys to follow.

The boys' families also impacted their school successes by setting limits and encouraging the boys to do their best. Charles explained how his parents would set limits when he said, "My parents help me. My parents always make sure I do my homework and stuff and sometimes they won't let me go places because of my grades so that makes me want to do better." The limits that Donovan's family set for him impacted his school success as well. He explained "They push me to do better, and then I know I can do better. They push me to do more than just get by. They push me to do more and help me to be more successful in life." The boys perceive that they have an obligation to their families to graduate from high school. They recognize that their families want the best for them and the boys don't want to let them down.

Parental conversations also impacted the boys' school successes. Mike discussed the impact his parents had on him when he said, "I think it has to do with my parents. They never really sugar-coated stuff, they kept it 100 percent. They would tell me when I'm not doing things and that just makes you get up. They were right about the whole high school thing."

Donovan concluded, "All I know is that my grandparents and parents told me that education is everything!"

Summary

The participants in the study spoke candidly about their school successes and failures and disclosed a plethora of data that pertained to the research questions. The data revealed that the boys believed their school successes were impacted by teachers who practiced an effective pedagogy, school supports and family influences. Effective teaching was evidenced in the

teachers' ability to use formative assessment and check for comprehension as they were delivering instruction. The boys also believed that their school successes were impacted by teachers who built meaningful relationships with them and had high expectations for adherence to the rules. The boys also believed that their school successes had been impacted by the support they received from the credit recovery program they were placed in. The data suggest that the teachers who taught the program added to their success because they provided a variety of kinds of coaching that also impacted their school successes. Finally, the boys believed that their families had impacted their school successes. The familial influences were evidenced by setting examples for the boys to follow, setting limits, and the conversations that they had with the boys on the importance of education.

The data also revealed that the boys' believed their school failures were impacted by teachers who practiced an ineffective pedagogy and school structures, policies and procedures. The boys believed that ineffective teaching was evidenced by a lack of commitment to teaching and learning. In addition, the boys believed that ineffective teachers' lacked the ability to build relationships with them and that they communicated low expectations.

The boys also believed that school structures, policies and procedures impacted their school failures. One such factor was the fundamental policy that removed students from the program who were not adhering to fundamental guidelines. The boys also believed that their middle school experiences had inadequately prepared them for success in high school. Finally, the boys believed that the requirement of passing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) had impacted their school failures. The boys' insights into their school successes and failures point to practices that school personnel may wish to adopt in order to ensure that the successes of African-American boys outweigh their failures.

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY

Overview

The final chapter of this research report will begin with a summary of the study followed by the contributions that the boys' voices have added to the existing literature. Limitations of the study will be addressed. Finally, implications for my district will be explored along with personal implications for me as a practitioner scholar in the Pinellas County School District.

Summary

This qualitative study was designed to give voice to African-American boys who shared their beliefs about improving their school successes. More specifically the study sought to determine the factors that African-American boys believed impacted their school successes and failures. The study was guided by the Critical Race Theory framework and employed the counter-storytelling technique to capture the boys' beliefs and to honor their stories of schooling. This study has personal significance for me because as a previous guidance counselor and a current administrator, I am all too familiar with the challenges that African-American boys face in the education system.

Three African-American high school boys were selected to participate in the study. Each of the participants was in his fourth year of high school in the Pinellas County School District and was at risk of not graduating. Data were collected in the form of individual and group interviews.

Data analysis revealed that the boys' school successes were impacted by caring teachers who practiced an effective pedagogy, school supports and family messages. The data also revealed that the boys' school failures were impacted by teachers who practiced an ineffective pedagogy and school structures, policies and procedures. The boys spoke at length about the

factors that they believed impacted their school failures. As they discussed the factors that impacted their school successes, factors it became clear that those factors gave the boys the determination and assistance needed to overcome the barriers that have impacted their school failures and hindered their graduation from high school. The participants in the study were knowledgeable about the factors that impacted their school successes and failures and their voices will prove significant in discussions on improving the school successes of this population.

Contributions to the Literature

The boys' beliefs about the factors that impacted their school successes and failures added to the existing literature on the schooling experiences of African-American boys. The boys' believed that their school failures were impacted by teachers who practiced an ineffective pedagogy and school structures, policies and procedures. The theme of student failure and ineffective pedagogy is supported by the research from Ladson-Billings (1995) and Howard (2010) both of whom encouraged a culturally relevant pedagogy that respects students' knowledge values and priorities. Teachers who do not develop knowledge of their students are susceptible to the typically negative messages from the media and other sources about African-American boys. Teachers' beliefs inform their teaching practices, and in turn they create classroom cultures that communicate low expectations, thus impacting the school failures of African-American boys.

The boys also believed that school structures, policies and procedures impacted their school failures. This theme is consistent with the research of Gregory, Skiba and Noguera (2010) who document the disparity of discipline practices throughout the United States. African-American students are disciplined more severely and more often than their non-black counterparts who commit the same infraction. Howard (2008) contends that schools with high levels of students who are deficient in core subject areas have high incidences of suspensions and

expulsions. The practice of removing students from the classroom has a negative impact on their learning. The boys in this study voiced a similar concern about being removed from class for minor so-called offenses and then missing valuable opportunities to learn.

The boys believed that their school successes were impacted by teachers with an effective pedagogy, school supports and family influences. Their beliefs about their school successes are supported in the literature as well. The boys believed that teachers who practiced an effective pedagogy impacted their school successes. Effective teaching was evidenced in the teachers' ability to effectively deliver instruction, build relationships, communicate high expectations and manage the classroom environment. Although not mentioned in Chapter 2, effective teaching behaviors that the teachers demonstrated are described by Bondy and Ross (2008) as those of "warm demanders." Warm demanders build positive relationships with students, ensure that their students are learning and set high academic and behavioral expectations for their students.

The boys also believed that their school successes were impacted by the credit program they had been placed in by the school. In the program, they earned credits and raised their grade point averages by re-taking courses they had previously failed. Although the boys believed the program impacted their school successes, further analysis revealed that the teachers created a nurturing environment in the course and coached the boys on a variety of topics that positively impacted their school successes. This belief supports the research of Roberts (2010) who found that teachers showed care for their students by communicating their concern for their students' futures. The teachers assisted the boys with academic remediation, and tutored them in other subject areas. The boys' beliefs about how the academic assistance impacted their school successes are supported in the literature. Warm demander teachers insist that students learn and

provide a variety of learning interventions to support their students' learning (Bondy & Ross, 2008). The boys believed that this support had an impact on their school successes.

Another factor that the boys believed impacted their school successes was family influences. The influences were evidenced by educated family members who set examples for the boys to follow. Other family members communicated academic expectations and set limits that were enforced to evidence their familial influences. In addition, the family influence was evidenced in meaningful conversations with the boys. During the conversations, the family members communicated the importance of graduating from high school. This theme of family influence is supported in the writings of Yosso (2005) who describes familial influences as cultural wealth that supports the academic achievements of students of color. Despite the obstacles that African American boys face, their families expect them to graduate from high school and the expectation is communicated to the boys.

The boys believed that the various factors that impacted their school failures began in elementary school and continued in middle and high school. Their beliefs support the research of Kunjufu (1982) and Osborne (1997) that documents how the school failures of African-American boys begins in elementary school and follows them throughout their high school careers. The boys also believed that their experiences with school failure negatively impacted their high school academic identities. The boys believed that their elementary and middle school experiences shaped the academic identities that they carried into high school and their lack of preparation was evidenced by their school failures.

The boys' beliefs about the factors that impacted their school failures discount Fordham's and Ogbu's (1986) research. In contrast, the boys believed that an education would have a positive impact on their economic opportunities. In fact, each of the boys in this study voiced

the desire to learn. The boys believed that their academic identities were negatively impacted by low expectations and ineffective teachers. Their beliefs support the research of Cushman (2003) who found that students notice when their teachers don't like them and their academic progress is negatively impacted by the non-caring relationship. Their beliefs also support the research of the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2012) that found African-American boys are locked out of school because they are denied access to student-centered learning, a necessary ingredient for academic success.

The boys also believed that because they are Black, they were expected to fail and received a less than adequate education. This experience impacted the boys' academic identities as well. Despite the obstacles the boys faced, they still believed that they would graduate from high school. Their beliefs about graduating from high school are supported by Sanders (1997) who explored the achievement ethos of African-American students who continue to try to achieve academic success despite the difficulties and hindrances that they must contend with. Although the boys faced academic failures, each of them voiced determination to graduate from high school. The boys' achievement ethos was evidenced in their willingness to participate in credit recovery programs, retake the FCAT and continue to attend school.

The participants in the study shared their educational experiences to identify the factors that had contributed to their school successes and failures. Their stories will also provide implications for improving the school successes of African-American boys. Their beliefs about the factors that impacted their school successes and failures add to and strengthen the literature because the boys share first-hand accounts of their educational experiences. In addition, the boys give specific suggestions for improving the school successes of this population.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with three boys from one high school in the Pinellas County School District. The reader must determine if there is adequate trustworthiness in the findings to consider transferring the insights gleaned from the boys to other high school settings. In addition, I worked as a guidance counselor in the school for several years and each of the boys had a relationship with me. I would argue, however, that the relationship added to the authenticity of their responses because rapport was easily established. The boys understood that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they were able to withdraw their consent at any time. The boys were also aware that they would be assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. In addition, the boys were aware that they could choose not to comment or answer a question that made them feel uncomfortable.

I am also an African-American woman who began as a high school guidance counselor in this district. In that position, I experienced first-hand the barriers that African-American boys must overcome to graduate from high school. Currently, I am an administrator in a drop-out prevention program and I continue to dedicate efforts toward increasing equity and improving the academic successes of all students, with an emphasis on African-American boys. Therefore, my position as an African-American woman and educator who has a passion for increasing the school successes of this population should be considered as readers consider the trustworthiness of the findings I have presented.

Implications for Practice

The boys' beliefs about the factors that have impacted their school successes and failures can be used to strengthen and inform school reform policy. Their voices paint a vivid picture of the educational experiences of African-American boys in the Pinellas County School District. Their stories hold valuable clues for educational leaders, teachers and staff who are also

dedicated to increasing the academic successes of African-American boys in this district. The following four implications are suggested as a result of the data analysis and findings.

Student Voice

The boys were aware and insightful about the factors in the Pinellas County School District that impacted their educational experiences. They believed, for example, that their school successes would have increased if they had been given the opportunity to select their teachers. Instead, their requests were ignored, opinions debased and they were forced to remain in classrooms with ineffective teachers. The boys' beliefs would suggest that they felt invisible. Invisible children are described as those who are educationally neglected; they are also socially devalued because removing the barriers that impede their success is not viewed as a priority (Books, 2010). To reduce their invisibility, and enhance the likelihood of their success, educational leaders must include the voices of African-American boys in their discussions on school reform policies.

Culturally Relevant Professional Development

The boys were keenly aware that their race impacted their schooling experiences. Specifically, the boys believed that they were not expected to graduate and that they received ineffective academic instruction because they were black. On the other hand, the boys' believed their academic successes had been positively impacted by teachers who exhibited an effective pedagogy. The effective teaching practices included building relationships with the boys, and ensuring that they learned the course content. An important part of effective pedagogy was the effectiveness of teachers at managing the learning environment. To this end, educators should be required to participate in ongoing culturally relevant professional development to address teacher practices that improve the school successes of African-American boys.

During culturally relevant professional development, teachers are given the opportunity to self-reflect and identify how their beliefs inform their instruction. As the conversations continue, teacher relationships are strengthened and they create a culture that encourages success. Schools that require teachers to participate in ongoing sessions on race and culture have shown success in closing the achievement gap (Howard, 2010). Culturally relevant professional development must be implemented by educational leaders who are concerned with increasing the school successes of African-American boys.

Culturally relevant professional development will also educate teachers on recognizing the strengths that African-American boys bring to the classroom. The boys believed that their school successes were impacted by their families' influences. Family influence is one form of cultural wealth. Yosso (2005) defines cultural wealth as the survival skills that students of color bring into the classroom from their communities and their homes. Cultural wealth breeds resiliency and increases the academic successes of students of color. Culturally relevant teachers build upon the strengths that their students bring to the classroom, thereby impacting the school success of their students. The boys' relationships with their families appeared to be a resource upon which educators might draw to help them succeed in school.

Middle School Reform

The boys also believed that their middle school experiences did little to prepare them for high school. For example, each of the boys believed that, during middle school, they were promoted every year despite putting forth very little effort. As a result, the boys entered high school with a faulty philosophy and poor academic identity that impacted their school failures. Educational leaders must increase the academic rigor and expectations for middle school students.

The boys also believed that they entered high school without understanding the requirements for graduating. In middle school, the boys were not required to apply themselves, yet they continued to pass their classes. In high school, the boys' grades were calculated into grade point averages, and they were required to accumulate credits. The boys entered high school without this knowledge and their lack of knowledge about what was required impacted their school failures. African-American boys must be educated about the requirements of high school graduation before they begin high school.

Graduation Coach

The boys also believed that their school successes were impacted by teachers who coached them on a variety of topics. This belief has implications for leaders in my district as well. African-American boys should be paired with a coach to assist them with a variety of topics including understanding how to successfully navigate middle school while preparing for success in high school. In addition, the boys believed they benefitted from being coached on how to handle situations with other teachers, how to improve their academic progress, and goal-setting. Although mentoring is implemented in my district, the boys' comments about the kinds of coaching they appreciated could provide important direction for educators.

Legislation

Educational leaders must also create policies that address the graduation rate of African-American boys. Nationwide we can expect that at least 50% of this population will not graduate from high school (Howard, 2008). The Pinellas County School District ranked last in the nation for graduating African-American males in 2008 (Sharockman, 2011). To this end, the policies must include improvement in retention percentages as well, and there must be a requirement for school districts to submit documentation on how the percentages will be obtained.

Legislation must also be created to ensure that African-American boys are represented in college preparatory programs. The Pinellas County School District utilizes a lottery system to assign students to these highly coveted programs. To level the playing field, educational leaders in my district must reserve a percentage of seats in the college preparatory programs for African-American boys. The legislation must include a directive to ensure the seats are reserved and include a plan that outlines required retention percentages to reduce premature withdrawals and increase completion rates. Compliance policies would create a more equitable education system that would prepare these students for high school graduation and college admissions.

Educational leaders must also reform discipline policies that currently produce the discipline disparities in our nation. Schools must implement alternative forms of discipline that decrease current suspension rates. School leaders should invest in professional development that focuses on classroom management that emphasizes implementing behavioral interventions in the classroom. Schools must also be required to implement discipline plans that outline the discipline rendered for infractions. The discipline plan would provide transparency and ensure that discipline is implemented fairly. Caution should be taken when removing African-American boys from the learning environment and suspension must be regarded as a last resort. Research suggests that the nation's current discipline practices impact the underachievement of African-American boys (Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010). To ensure the success of the population, the aforementioned policies must be managed at the local, state and national levels.

Finally, educational leaders must reform the current legislation surrounding high stakes testing. The boys believed that their inability to successfully complete the FCAT impacted their school failure. The boys have retaken the FCAT three times. In addition, they were required to take FCAT remediation courses to assist them with preparing for the test. Despite their efforts,

they have not been successful in passing the test. Without a passing score, the boys will not receive a high school diploma. African-American boys take the brunt of the punishment in this era of accountability and high stakes testing because they are not adequately prepared to pass the test.

These implications were created to address the factors that three African-American high school boys believed impacted their educational successes and failures. It is imperative that they are no longer made to be invisible and that their words encourage immediate action from their educational leaders. African-American boys must be given the platform to express their beliefs about their educational experiences in an effort to inform educational reform efforts. Their educational successes will positively impact the Pinellas County School System our state and nation.

Next Steps

This study provided implications for me as well. As a current administrator and past guidance counselor, I am all too familiar with the academic failures of African-American boys. Their beliefs about their educational experiences have informed my practice and will guide my commitment to improving their academic successes. The following personal implications were gleaned from the boys' beliefs about the factors that have impacted their educational experiences.

Student Voice

As a practitioner scholar I will bring the voices of marginalized students, specifically African-American boys, to the table with me during discussions on improving their school successes. I will speak up about the inequities that exist in my district and use data and research to support my stance. I will strive to implement interventions and create environments that are conducive to increasing their school success. For example, I plan to create a safe ongoing

platform for marginalized students to discuss their experiences with me by creating an advisory committee at my school for African-American boys. The sessions will give me an opportunity to coach the boys on a variety of topics, including what will be required to graduate from high school. The boys in the study were intuitively aware of the factors that have impacted their educational experiences. This opportunity must be provided to other students who will share their insights with me as I continue to improve my practice.

Conversations on Race and Culture

The second implication for my personal practice is to create opportunities for ongoing conversations on race, culture and the achievement gap for the teachers in my program. As an administrator, I facilitate professional development sessions and lead discussions on interventions that increase learning. By implementing opportunities to discuss race and culture, the teachers and I will be given an opportunity to self-reflect on how our beliefs have impacted our practice and make conscious decisions to adjust our practice and improve the academic successes of our students. Each session will provide an opportunity for self-reflection. In addition, the types of strategies, interventions and classroom cultures that increase the academic successes for African-American boys will be discussed. Finally, the sessions will encourage collaboration as the teachers work together to create solutions designed to increase the academic successes of African-American boys.

Conclusion

The literature has an overabundance of information on what can be done to improve the academic successes of African-American boys. What is lacking in the literature, however, are the voices of this population and their beliefs about what can be done to increase their academic achievement. Through this study I sought to answer the following research question: What factors do African-American high school boys believe explain their school successes and

failures? Through a counter-storytelling technique, the boys used their voices to answer the question by giving a first-hand account of their educational experiences. In addition, the boys discussed their beliefs about the factors that impacted their experiences.

This study was also conducted to inform my practice on improving the academic successes of the African-American boys in this district. Their beliefs about the factors that have shaped their academic successes and failures can be used to enlighten the leaders in my district about the barriers that impede the school successes of this population. African-American boys in my district are struggling to graduate from high school. We must be committed to implementing strategies that improve the academic successes of African-American boys and their voices must be included in the conversations dedicated to this cause.

EPILOGUE

This epilogue is written to inform the reader of the graduation statuses of each of the participants in the study.

Mike

Mike earned his high school diploma on June 2, 2014 and participated in the graduation ceremony with his cohort. Mike earned the required credits for graduation and raised his GPA to a 2.2. Although he didn't successfully pass the FCAT reading test, he earned the concordant score on the ACT and satisfied the graduation requirement. Mike plans to become a fire fighter or attend college locally to pursue a degree in business management.

Donovan

Donovan earned his high school diploma on June 2, 2014 and participated in the graduation ceremony with his cohort. Donovan earned the required credits for graduation, raised his GPA to a 2.2 and successfully passed the FCAT reading and math tests. Mike plans to attend the local art institute and pursue a career in graphic design.

Charles

Charles earned a certificate of completion on June 2, 2014. Charles participated in the graduation ceremony with his cohort although he did not earn a high school diploma. Charles earned the required credits for graduation and raised his GPA to a 2.3. He was not able to earn the required score on the FCAT reading test or earn the ACT concordant score. Charles plans to retake both assessments in an effort to obtain the required score. He has ambitions of attending college locally after he earns his high school diploma.

APPENDIX A
CONSENT LETTERS

Cover Letter

Protocol Title: African-American high school boys' understandings of their school successes and failures.

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Celeste Thomas and I am a student at the University of Florida. I am trying to learn more about how African-American male students understand their school success and failures. If you decide to allow your student to participate, your student will be asked to participate in three individual interviews and one group interview with other group participants where they will be asked to answer questions about their educational experiences.

The total participation time will be four hours (1 hour per interview, 1 hour focus group). Your student will benefit from participating in this group because his experiences will assist other African-American males who are struggling in high school. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. Your student will receive no compensation for participating in this study.

Your student does not have to be in this study if you don't want him to and your student can quit the study at any time. Your student's information will be kept confidential. If your student doesn't like a question, he doesn't have to answer it and, if your student asks, his answers will not be used in the study. I also want you to know that whatever you decide will not affect your student's grades in any way.

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to allow my student to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Parental and Student Consent

Protocol Title: African-American high school boys' understandings of their school successes and failures

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to research African-American high school boys' understandings of their school successes and failures.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked to participate in 3 individual interviews and 1 small group interview to discuss your understandings of your school successes and failures.

Time required:

4 Hours:

3 individual interviews (45-60 minutes each)

1 small group interview (45-60 minutes each)

Risks and Benefits:

There are no risks involved in this study. There are no direct benefits to participants for participating in this study. You will be given the opportunity to discuss your beliefs about the factors that have contributed to your educational experiences. By sharing your experiences, you will help to improve the educational experiences of other African-American high school students.

Compensation:

Participants will receive no compensation for participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

Your identity and grades will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. You will be assigned a fictitious name. Neither your name nor the name of the school will be used in any report. Participants will be asked to treat discussions with confidentiality as well, and although confidentiality is expected, the researcher can't promise that participants will adhere to the confidentiality request.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Celeste Thomas (Principal Investigator)

Elizabeth Bondy (University Supervisor)

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office
Box 112250
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250
Phone 352-392-0433.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Parent or Guardian: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW ONE: BACKGROUND, ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, MIDDLE SCHOOL

1. Please tell me a little about yourself (How old are you, what grade are you in, where do you live, who do you live with, what are things you're really good at, what do you like to do when you're not at school, what kind of student have you been over the years).
2. Today I want to talk with you about elementary and middle school, and what they were like for you. Tell me about your elementary school experience (where did you go, did you feel successful in elementary school, what stands out for you the most about elementary school).
3. Tell me about a bad experience or teacher from elementary school (no names).
4. What made the experience or teacher so bad?
5. How were you affected by this bad experience or teacher?
6. Tell me about a good experience or teacher from elementary school (no names).
7. What made the experience or teacher so good?
8. How were you affected by this good experience or teacher?
9. Tell me about your middle school experience (where did you go, did you feel successful in middle school, what stands out for you the most about middle school).
10. Tell me about a bad experience or teacher from middle school (no names).
11. What made the experience or teacher so bad?
12. How were you affected by this experience?
13. Tell me about a good experience or teacher from middle school (no names).
14. What made the experience or teacher so good?
15. How were you affected by this good experience or teacher?
16. Is there anything else that you'd like me to know (positive or negative) about what elementary and middle school were like for you?

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW TWO: HIGH SCHOOL

1. Today I want to talk with you about high school and what it's been like for you. What's the best thing about high school?
2. Which class(es) do you like best? Why? In which classes do you get the best grades? Why?
3. Which class(es) do you not do so well in? Why?
4. Now, tell me about a really bad high school experience or teacher (no names).
5. What made that experience or teacher so bad?
6. It sounds like it was really hard to do well in that in that class. What made it so hard to do well?
7. Tell me about a really good high school experience or teacher (no names).
8. What made that experience or teacher so good?
9. It sounds like you had success in that class. Were there things that helped you to be successful? What were they?
10. Who or what has helped you be successful in school?
11. When have you felt smart in school? Tell me more about this.
12. What 5 words would you choose to describe what high school has been like for you? Tell me more about each word.

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW THREE: HIGH SCHOOL

1. What are the best things that have happened in high school?
2. What are things that have helped you in high school?
3. Have there been things that have gotten in the way of your performance in high school? These might be things that are here in the school or things that are outside of school.
4. What are some bad experiences you've had in high school?
5. You are currently at risk of not graduating because you are lacking credits and/or your GPA is less than a 2.0. How did you get into this situation? What could the school have done to help you avoid this situation?
6. Across the United States there are a lot of African-American males in this situation. Why do you think this is the case?
7. Some people feel that students are pushed out of school as opposed to dropping out of school. What do you think about the idea that students are pushed out?
8. What do you have to do in order to graduate from high school?
9. What type of support will you need to graduate? How might you go about getting this support?
10. What would you want the world to know about what school has been like for you?
11. What would you like the world to know about how school could be make better for you?

APPENDIX E
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What is it like being an African-American male in your high school?
2. What does it take to be successful in your high school?
3. In what ways are you similar to successful high school students?
4. In what ways are you different from successful high school students?
5. As a student, what or who has had the greatest impact on you? Tell me more.
6. What has the school done to assist you in improving your school success?
7. What could be changed at the school to assist you in improving your school success?
8. How would the changes impact your school success?
9. What else do you want the world to know about what school has been like for you?
10. What else would you like the world to know about how school could be made better for you?

APPENDIX F
SAMPLE TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW

- I The first question is please tell me a little about yourself. How old are you?
- C Seventeen.
- I What grade are you in?
- C 12th.
- I Who do you live with?
- C My mom.
- I What are things you're really good at?
- C Basketball.
- I Ok, you're good at basketball. Do you play on a team?
- C Nope.
- I Ok, why not?
- C I don't have time.
- I Oh, because you're focusing on school? Ok, good. What do you like to do when you're not at school?
- C Play basketball.
- I Do you play, like in the neighborhood?
- C Yes.
- I What kind of student have you been over the years?
- C Not too good some of my years and some of them are pretty good. .
- I Ok, you said not too good. Tell me what that means.
- C Like staying out of trouble and not keeping my grades up.
- I So you haven't been staying out of trouble?
- C Yeah, in the past, but now I am.

I Ok. So what's different? Because you said you haven't been such a good student over the years so what's different now?

C I changed my attitude.

I You changed your attitude, and what has that helped you do?

C Keep calm in certain situations so I won't get in more trouble.

I I want to talk to you about elementary and middle school and what they were like for you. So tell me about your elementary school; which school did you go to?

C Mell's Elementary.

I Mell's Elementary, ok, and you went there for all five years...

C Yes.

I ...kindergarten thru fifth grade?

C Yes.

I Did you feel like you were successful in elementary school?

C Yes.

I Why do you say that?

C Because I was doing well in my school work.

I Ok, and doing well, what does that mean, you were making good grades...

C Yes.

I ...you were doing your homework?

C Yes, all that.

I Ok. What stands out for you the most about elementary school? Any memories that you have?

C My teachers.

I Tell me about your teachers.

C Um, my third grade teacher she helped us out a lot with certain things and she helped me keep my grades up in other classes, too.

I That's a good segue to the next question because the next question is tell me about a bad experience or teacher from elementary school but don't give me any names. Were there any teachers that you had that you didn't really care for?

C Not really.

I Not in elementary school?

C Yeah.

I So all of your teachers in elementary school were good teachers?

C They were pretty good.

I Was there an experience that you had in elementary school that was bad that you can think of?

C No.

I Everything from elementary was positive?

C Yeah.

I You were on the right track at elementary school.

C Yes.

I Tell me more about your fifth grade teacher. Don't give me her name because the next question is tell me about a good experience or teacher from middle school.

C Ok.

I What was it about this teacher that made the experience so good?

C She always had a positive attitude towards us and would help us with other assignments from different classes, too, and she made sure we had good grades in her class, too.

I You said she had a positive attitude what did that look like?

C Like you'd never see her mad or sad or anything.

I Ok. So you had teachers who were mad or who were angry you thought who didn't have a good attitude towards you?

C Not really, but you could see the difference between her and the others.

I Ok, so it sounds like she made you feel like she really cared about you.

C Yes.

- I Ok, and so what made the experience so good? Was it that she was always happy and her attitude...?
- C Yes.
- I ...and willing to help you with your assignments?
- C Yes.
- I You also said that she made sure that you had good grades. So how did she ensure that you had good grades? What did she do?
- C Missing assignments, she'd make sure you had the opportunity to make them up.
- I So she didn't penalize you for making mistakes; she gave you a chance to correct it?
- C Yes.
- I Ok, good. Now how did this affect you being with this teacher who had a positive attitude and was able to help you – how did it affect you in school?
- C Well sometimes I had a positive thing and sometimes I had it bad because when you see a teacher like that you expect other teachers to do the same thing, but they all don't do the same, so...
- I So the negative part of that is that you thought all teachers would treat you that way, would give you another chance and have a positive attitude and be willing to help you no matter what but then you found that all teachers weren't like that.
- C Yes.
- I Ok, so what was the positive experience?
- C That, um... it showed people do care about you and all that type of stuff.
- I Ok, so for you then it sounds like it's important that your teachers show you that they care?
- C Yes.
- I And they show you they care by their attitude, by helping you and by giving you opportunities to be successful?
- C Yes.
- I Ok, that makes sense. Anything else you want to tell me about elementary school?
- C Not really.

I We're going to move on to middle school now. So where did you go to middle school? Tell me about middle school.

C I went to John Reynolds.

I Did you go there from sixth to eighth grade, all three years?

C Yes.

I Did you feel successful in middle school?

C In a way, kind of.

I Ok, kind of, so what does that mean, kind of?

C I definitely started getting in trouble but I always found a way to keep my grades right.

I Ok, so you said this is when you started getting in trouble; what does that look like?

C Like getting phone calls home and getting sent to the office and stuff like that.

I Why were they calling home?

C Because my attitude changed once I got around new people.

I Ok, and what did your attitude look like?

C It was like... more like a negative attitude because I always tried to fit in with the other group of people since I was the newest one, so I was trying to fit in.

I Trying to fit in, ok, and you felt like to fit in you had to change your attitude to a negative attitude?

C Yeah, like not too bad but just like not being the same person I was before, doing different stuff.

I What stands out the most for you about middle school; thinking back to your experience at John Reynolds what do you remember the most?

C One of my teachers again had... two teachers.

I Was this a positive experience with the teacher?

C Yes.

I Ok, so tell me about this teacher; don't give me her name, just...

C It was like my fifth grade teacher; they were both trying to like care for you and make sure you did right and keep you out of trouble. They'd talk to the other teachers to see if you could make up work, too.

I Was this an added class or was this just a regular teacher?

C It was just a regular teacher.

I Anything else about that teacher? You said it was two teachers.

C Yes.

I And so they both had a positive attitude and helped you make up work and tried to help you be successful?

C Yes.

I Did you have a bad experience from middle school that you can think of with a teacher or an experience?

C No.

I No bad experiences from middle school? Ok, so then is there anything else that you'd like me to know, positive or negative about what elementary and middle school were like for you; anything else you can think of?

C No.

I No, ok. Well that completes our first interview; thank you so much.

[End]

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Celeste Henry Thomas is a summer 2014 graduate of the doctoral program in curriculum and instruction at the University of Florida. Before beginning the doctoral program, she received a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in 1993, a Master of Arts degree in guidance and counseling education in 2004 from the University of South Florida and an Educational Specialist degree in administration and supervision from National Louis University in 2010. She is currently an administrator for Pinellas County Schools.